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TEACHING FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF SELF-ESTEEM  
OF ADOLESCENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

by  
Kathy Carney

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
May 2, 2000

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Dihoff

Date Approved 5-9-00

## ABSTRACT

Kathy Carney

Teaching for the Enhancement of Self-esteem of

Adolescents with Learning Disabilities

2000

Dr. Dihoff

School Psychology Program

The purpose of this study was to examine if participation in structured, self-concept enhancing classroom activities would improve the self-esteem level of adolescents with learning disabilities. Forty-eight high school students identified with learning disabilities participated in this study. One-half of the students served as the control group and worked with the same teacher. The other 24 students were in the experimental group and were instructed by a different teacher who conducted lessons aimed at improving students' level of self-esteem over a period of 15 weeks. Self-esteem scores were obtained by administering the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* to all participants during the pre-test and post-test phases of the study.

Analysis of covariance at the .05 significance level yielded no significant

difference in the posttest scores of the control group and the posttest scores of the experimental group on the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory*. In addition, a *t* test conducted at the .05 significance level yielded no significant difference between the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group. A great deal of variation in the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* scores of both groups across the pretest and posttest phases of the study was noted.

## MINI-ABSTRACT

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Results yielded no significant difference in the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* posttest scores of the control group and experimental group. In addition, no significant difference was found between the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **The Problem**

#### **Need**

Attending school and achieving at the level of their ability helps adolescents feel good about themselves and continue to mature. One of the problems that may interfere with normal adolescent development is learning difficulties in school. Young people who perform poorly in school often develop low self-esteem, remain psychologically immature, and fail to realize their intellectual and occupational potential (Kimmel & Weiner, 1995, 458). The self-esteem of students who are not successful in school suffers due to the constant exposure to competition and evaluation that regularly identifies them as being less competent than their peers.

The acquisition of negative feelings of self-worth is a problem for many students who have been identified as having learning disabilities. Authorities have noted that emotions of students with learning disabilities develop differently from those of their peers. Rather than learning and developing attitudes about tasks they "can do", children with learning deficits often learn what they "can't do" (Haring, McCormick, & Haring, 1994, 132). This lack of positive self-regard often results in poor self-concept and low self-esteem.

By the time many students with learning disabilities arrive at high school, they have had many negative, frustrating experiences. They may struggle with academic tasks and have difficulty in their personal relationships as a result of their learning deficits. Consequently, they also have a lower level of self-esteem than their non-disabled peers.

Increased expectations are placed on students when they attend secondary school. They have to deal with demanding course content and difficult assignments, while adhering to multiple sets of rules set forth by their various teachers. There is also an increased need for organizational skills to keep track of several classes, and effective time management is essential to completing expected academic tasks while participating in extra curricular activities or maintaining outside employment. When students fail to accomplish all that is expected, negative feelings about the self is often the result.

There is little to no time available during the school day when students have the opportunity to reflect, focus on the positive aspects of themselves, and give some attention to their areas of success. The intent of this project is to provide students with the experience of increasing self-knowledge, improving learning strategies, building self-concept, and appreciating their strengths. Participation in these activities could assist in increasing the level of self-esteem of high school students with learning disabilities.

Self-esteem plays a major role in the quality of life. Feeling positive about one's self is necessary to develop the courage to take risks and face the challenges of a

demanding society. Educators have an obligation to prepare students to meet these challenges.

### **Purpose**

Negative attitudes about school that can be damaging to self-esteem develop over many years and become part of the adolescent's basic value system. To be successful, any treatment program must promote a value system that helps students to improve academic skills while building confidence in these skills. However, young people need more than just subject matter.

The purpose of this study is to examine if participation in structured, self-concept enhancing classroom activities would improve the self-esteem level of adolescents with learning disabilities. Direct efforts to create a positive, supportive, growth promoting learning environment will be made by including techniques and activities designed to enhance one's sense of identity and self-esteem into classroom practice.

### **Hypothesis**

High school students with learning disabilities will achieve higher levels of self-esteem after participation in regularly scheduled, structured classroom activities designed to improve self-concept.

## **Theory**

There are several theoretical perspectives in the field of psychology, each with its unique contributions as well as limitations. Although many conceptual differences exist among the varied orientations, all approaches have at least some of the same goals. One of the common threads that is present in most psychological models is concern for the individual's relationship with him/herself, for a healthy self-concept can lead to a fulfilling, rewarding, productive life.

Recent psychoanalytic theories focus on predictable developmental sequences in which early experiences of the self shift according to an expanding awareness of others. Margaret Mahler, a central influence on contemporary object-relations theory, identified four stages that occur in the first three years of life. The individual begins in a state of psychological fusion with the mother, and gradually progresses to separation. During the separation/individuation phase, which starts by four to five months of age, the child experiences separation from significant others but still turns to them for comfort. Others are looked to for approval of the child's developing sense of self, and these relationships can provide a healthy self-esteem (Corey, 1996, 109-110).

Erikson also presents his theory in terms of progressive stages, but he describes development across the entire life span. Of particular interest in this study is the latency stage; a period of acquiring new skills and developing a sense of industry. Failure to learn new things can lead to feelings of inferiority. Erikson believes that positive identification with trustworthy, encouraging teachers is essential to the

development of a strong ego. The positive outcome of such interaction is a sense of competence, which is healthy preparation for later life (Ryckman, 1993, 191).

Adolescents who adequately progress through the latency stage begin to develop a growing sense of self-identity. They recognize their own competence, can take initiative, and are able to follow tasks through to completion. If identity diffusion occurs during this stage, individuals may exhibit a range of negative emotional states, including pessimism, boredom, unfocused anger, personal confusion, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness (Ryckman, 1993, 197). Consistent with Erikson's theory, Marcia (1967) found that students with strong ego identities were less adversely affected (in terms of loss of self-esteem) by failure on tasks that they believed to be associated with academic success than students with diffuse identities.

The humanistic/existential perspectives in contemporary psychology give a great deal of attention to self-development, with a major focus on personal growth that will move individuals toward reaching their full potential. This growth process has been labeled as the drive toward self-actualization, self-realization, or selfhood (Ryckman, 1993, 365).

In Maslow's theory of self-actualization, he posits that it is best to encourage the development of the good intrinsic nature of human beings. This can be accomplished by the gratification of human needs. Once the basic physiological, safety, and belonging needs have been satisfied, esteem needs begin to emerge. One type of esteem is based on respect for one's competence, independence, and accomplishments, while another type of esteem depends on the evaluations of others.



Maslow believed that self-esteem should be based on actual competence rather than praise or criticism from others, but he also contended that individuals can become sick if their esteem needs are thwarted. He claimed that environments that threaten the individual or do not allow for the satisfaction of basic needs are detrimental to growth. People who have been prevented from attaining gratification of needs cannot move forward the ultimate goal of self-actualization. They feel threatened and insecure and have little self-respect or self-esteem (Maslow, 1970, 45).

The self-concept is a central concept in Roger's person-centered theory. It is the organized set of characteristics that the individual perceives as being unique to him/herself. Development of a healthy self-concept depends on a deep and genuine caring by others that is not contaminated by evaluations or judgments of a person's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Roger's theory also predicts that persons who are self-accepting are also more accepting of the behavior of others (Ryckman, 1993, 407-409). A study of high school and college students by Phillips (1951) found positive correlations between self-acceptance and acceptance of others. Data for this aspect of this theory is also supported by a similar study conducted by Suinn and Geiger (1965).

Rogers also applied his theory to educational practices. He criticized educators for placing too much emphasis on the acquisition of cognitive skills, and not enough on the development of affective skills such as learning how to be a sensitive and loving person. He believed that the educational system was in need of reform in order to meet the needs of students. He proposed that students should be able to choose their own goals and to pursue them with the help and encouragement of faculty

(Ryckman, 1993, 418-420).

One of the central concepts of the existential philosophy is that the freedom to exercise free will and make choices gives individuals a sense of significance and feelings of dignity and worth. Most of Rollo May's writings reflect a concern with the nature of human experience, such as recognizing and dealing with power, accepting freedom and responsibility, and discovering one's identity. Along with other existential philosophers, he emphasized freedom to choose what to make of circumstances and made the assumption that people are free and therefore responsible for their choices and actions (Corey, 1996, 169-170). However, May has also expressed concern about the disintegration of values in modern society, and has identified the loss of individual sense of worth and dignity as one of the lost values. He feels that this loss of sense of self is due to people's feelings of powerlessness to change the impersonal enterprises that are ruling society (Ryckman, 1993, 436).

On a more hopeful note, the existential view includes the notion that existence is never fixed; humans are in a constant state of transition and continually recreate themselves. One of the basic dimensions of the human condition, according to the existential approach, is the capacity for self-awareness, which is at the root of most other human capacities, and is fundamental to human growth. Increased self-awareness can help people to realize that they may be allowing their identity to be defined by others rather than looking to themselves for approval and affirmation, or they may be able to accept their limitations and still feel worthwhile as they begin to understand that they do not need to be perfect to feel worthy (Corey, 1996, 172-174).

This notion of self-worth is extremely important in the development of adolescents because the primary challenge of adolescence is preparation to meet adulthood with a comfortable set of self perceptions and aspirations. The formation of an identity takes place over several years and is influenced by many factors, including what young people have learned about themselves as individuals. People who have a clear sense of their personal identity generally feel good about themselves, are able to work toward their goals and maintain close relationships with others, and remain relatively free from serious emotional distress. Identity confusion, on the other hand, is often associated with low self-esteem, difficulties in setting and achieving goals, strained personal relationships, and susceptibility to becoming emotionally upset (Kimmel, 1995, 387 - 390).

To establish identity requires individual effort in evaluating personal assets and liabilities and in learning how to utilize them in working to achieve a clearer concept of who one is and what one wants to become (Rice, 1990, 87). This concept of self is a conscious, cognitive perception and assessment by individuals of themselves. It is formed according to self-perceived physical characteristics, personality traits, skills, roles, and social status. The value placed on self-perception is referred to as self-esteem, and is extremely important in adolescence for a number of reasons. The level of self-esteem influences mental health, social adjustment, the quality of interpersonal relationships, progress in school, and vocational aspirations. Self-concept and self-esteem remain relatively stable, but certain studies have indicated that they can be negatively affected by disturbing events or improved by helpful events. In either case,

it is certain that change is more likely during adolescence than in adulthood (Rice, 1990, 233-234).

The complexity of self-concept has been addressed in several theoretical perspectives that are well established in the psychological and educational literature. Three of these theoretical approaches include reflected appraisals, social comparison, and attribution. Reflected appraisals emphasizes the contribution of feedback from significant others as having primary importance in the development of self-concept. This perspective also views self-concept as multiple; people develop a variety of self-concepts relating to the roles they occupy and the situations they experience (Sullivan, 1953). Social comparison and attribution emphasize the role that a person plays in his/her own self-concept. In social comparison, individuals contrast the perception of their ability, behavior, and accomplishments to those of others (Festinger, 1954). In attribution, individuals infer their own traits based on self-observation, in the same way that they infer the dispositions of others based on their observations of the behavior of others (Kelley, 1967). These theories have been useful in the development of assessment scales in the area of self-perception and in planning intervention strategies for students.

### **Definitions**

Attitudes: psychological states that involve emotions, beliefs, and behavior that predispose people to perceive, interpret, and act in certain ways.

Classroom Climate: the prevailing environmental conditions characterizing a classroom; the social and emotional qualities, broad attitudes and overall atmosphere of the classroom.

Identity: a sense of continuity and consistency of the self over time; a multifaceted concept that involves knowing one's self; the unified sense of self as uniquely different from others.

Learning Disabilities: a generic term referring to a heterogeneous group of disorders that are most evident as problems with the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities; presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction.

Self-concept: a collection of beliefs and ideas that an individual has about himself or herself; the individual's conscious, cognitive perception and evaluation of self.

Self-determination: the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself.

Self-esteem: respect or regard that a person has for oneself; the value or worth placed on the perceived self.

Study Skills Class: a credited course designed for high school students with learning disabilities who spend the majority of their school day in mainstream classes.

Attending students receive assistance with difficult assignments or confusing concepts. Instruction is also provided in learning strategies, organizational skills, social development, and needed content area skills. Individual accommodations and modifications that are required for students are also arranged by the study skills teacher.

### **Assumptions**

A possible confounding variable in this project is the fact that two different teachers work with participants in the study. One teacher instructs the control group, while the other teaches the experimental group. However, all students are attending Study Skills class where the primary objective is to assist them with achieving success in mainstream classes. In addition, both teachers have shared the same classroom for twelve years, are extremely familiar with each other's teaching styles, and agree that they have a similar philosophy of education and therefore treat students in basically the same fashion. The parallel in classroom climate, which results in comparable experience for students, reduces the possibility of confounding the effects of the treatment in this study.

Motivation of the students is another assumption made in this project. Both teachers conducting instruction in the Study Skills classes have a long history of encouraging students to improve and grow in academics as well as personal

development. It is believed that an inviting, caring environment, and a positive work ethic motivate all students to experience success.

### **Limitations**

There are certain limiting factors that should be noted concerning this study. The first is the minimal number of participants (approximately 48 students), which reduces the reliability of the total results.

The next limitation is the amount of time actually spent in self-esteem enhancing activities. Students in the control group participate in formal mini- lessons for about fifteen minutes of each Study Skills class session. This procedure continues for a period of fifteen weeks. There is virtually no control over their experiences and subsequent effect on their self-concepts for the remainder of each day.

In addition, while some researchers report that self-image and self-esteem can be improved by helpful events, other theorists claim that there is a significant degree of continuity in self-image across the teenage years. They suggest that self-concept usually stabilizes during adolescence, and may be temporarily influenced by events, but changes very little as individuals grow into adulthood.

Another limitation is that the strategies utilized in classroom lessons are not based on the results of student assessments. All activities are conducted in a small group setting and selected according to sound educational practice, but not necessarily intended to meet individual needs.

The last limitation that must be considered is that the scale being used is a self-

report instrument and therefore can be manipulated by the student. Interviews are being conducted to gauge whether the ratings match the manner in which the adolescents talk about themselves, and ratings are also contrasted with the teacher's knowledge of students based on observation.

## **Overview**

Literature that is relevant to this project is reviewed in Chapter 2. Information is presented on the development of self-concept and self-esteem of individuals, factors associated with self-esteem, causes and consequences of low self-esteem in adolescence, the negative aspects of self-esteem, characteristics of students with learning disabilities, and effective learning strategies and programs for students with and without learning disabilities.

In Chapter 3, the design of this study is specified. This includes a description of the setting and the sample population, the measurement instruments and how they are administered, and an explanation of the selection of classroom activities. The hypothesis is also restated in this section, along with an analysis of how it is tested.

The results of this experiment are presented in Chapter 4. An analysis of the data and interpretation of the findings are discussed at length. Chapter 5 contains a summary and conclusions, as well as implications of the results of this study.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

Beliefs about the self and the value or worth placed on the perceived self have an impact on the quality of life. This is an especially important issue during adolescence because young people are in the process of forming an identity and they are struggling with several developmental tasks. This review of pertinent literature on this topic begins with a discussion of the development of self-esteem, continues with information regarding factors associated with self-esteem, and includes some possible causes and consequences of low self-esteem. Interventions that have yielded positive results for adolescents are also presented, followed by a brief description of the negative aspects of self-esteem. Because this project focuses on adolescents with learning disabilities, studies involving the self-esteem of this population are treated in a separate section. In addition, several programs and strategies that have resulted in success for students with learning disabilities are discussed. This review concludes with a summary of the research that has been examined.

#### **Development of Self-Esteem**

The beginnings of the self occur through auditory cues, physical sensations,

body image cues, and personal memories. These input channels provide the emotional medium that allows the self to grow, and self-awareness develops as children begin to differentiate between themselves and others. Continued development and experiences lead to a view of the self that involves attributes that are physical, social, emotional, and intellectual. The interaction of these aspects results in the development of self-concept - ideas about oneself, and self-esteem - feelings and evaluations about oneself (Rice, 1990). Self-esteem is considered to be a representation of general well-being and related to successful coping with numerous developmental tasks. This is especially important during adolescence because several developmental challenges occur during this period. Positive self-esteem in adolescence is advantageous for coping with developmental tasks such as peer support and confronting problems (Diehl, Vicary, & Deike, 1997).

Adolescence is also a critical time for the development and expression of self-determination; "the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself" (Field & Hoffman, 1994). The emergence and nurturance of self-determination is necessary for the healthy growth of young people because it is essential to accomplishing major developmental tasks of adolescence. Two of the internal, affective factors that contribute to self-determination are to know yourself and value yourself. These two components create a foundation for behaving in a self-determined manner. In other words, one must have both a foundation in self-awareness and self-esteem as well as the ability to act on this foundation to be self-determined (Field, Hoffman, & Posch, 1997).

The development of self-esteem is a key issue during adolescence that affects and is affected by self-determination. Branden (1994) defined self-esteem as "confidence in our ability to think, confidence in our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life, and confidence in our right to be successful and happy; the feeling of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants, achieve our values, and enjoy the fruits of our efforts." The accompanying developmental tasks of adolescence that involve valuing the self include: accepting one's physique and using the body effectively, and acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior (Field, Hoffman, & Posch, 1997).

Adolescence is also characterized by a movement toward increased self-awareness and personal independence. According to Erikson (1968), a state of self-involvement alternating between unrealistic high expectations and poor self-concept underlies identity exploration. Identity exploration in adolescence is essential to the development of the increased self-awareness necessary for self-determination. The potential for self-determination is directly related to the individual's awareness of his or her strengths, weaknesses, needs, and preferences. Self-awareness and self-esteem are foundational building blocks for self-determination, for it is not possible to be self-determined without knowing and valuing one's self (Field, Hoffman, & Posch, 1997).

The interrelations of the sense of self-determination, school achievement, and self-esteem was the focus of a study conducted by Owens, Mortimer, & Finch (1996). Their research examined the effects of the sense of self-determination on the positive self-esteem of male adolescents in the family, the school, and the workplace. The data

from a five-wave longitudinal study on over 2,000 males from grade 10 to 5 years after high school was analyzed. The research was based on Rosenberg's self-attribution theory and Kohn's generalization theory, which contend that "if individuals experience self-direction, successfully adapt to the challenges facing them, and attribute their successes to themselves, they will come to view themselves as capable and worthy" (Owens, Mortimer, & Finch, 1996).

In this study, the term self-determination was also referred to as self-directed activity or intrinsic motivation. It was hypothesized that the greater the perception of self-determination in the family, the school, and the workplace, the more positive the impact on the adolescent's sense of self-esteem and worth. Expectations included that if a student develops an intrinsic motivation toward schoolwork, these experiences will have positive implications for self-esteem, and that a child's active participation in decision making in the family will foster a sense of efficacy. Results indicated that a sense of self-determination in the three investigated spheres of life enhances adolescent self-esteem. Shared decision making in the family and an internal locus of control in school lead to positive evaluations; findings with respect to the workplace were mixed. It was noted that the same kinds of experiences that have been found to stimulate positive psychological outcomes in adulthood - personal discretion in decision making, a sense of self-determination, interesting and challenging tasks - also foster self-esteem in the adolescent years (Owens, Mortimer, & Finch 1996).

One explanation of the nature of self-esteem is addressed in the field of neurobiology. Research developments in brain chemistry - particularly the effects of

the neurotransmitter serotonin - heighten the understanding of behavior that may be affected by levels of self-esteem. Recent studies suggest that fluctuations in serotonin play an important role in regulating the level of self-esteem and one's place within the social hierarchy. Researchers associate high serotonin levels in the brain with high self-esteem and social status, and low serotonin levels with low self-esteem and social status. All people have the same biological need to succeed, and require a positive self-concept and healthy self-esteem. Evolutionary psychology argues that each success enhances the level of the neurotransmitter serotonin in the brain, and consequently also enhances self-esteem as well as motor coordination. Failure and negative social feedback inhibit the effects of serotonin and lead to lower self-esteem and possible impulsive behavior. This research on serotonin adds biological support to some educational practices that foster high self-esteem. These include portfolio assessments that encourage self-examination in students and improve students' self-concept and self-esteem; cooperative learning groups where students can experience success in both leading and supporting roles; learning strategies for conflict resolution that are consistent with neurobiological research; and the provision of support in the classroom that helps students to discover their strengths and weaknesses (Sylwester, 1997).

Research on personality development which focuses on individual traits and configurations that make up personality types can also help to heighten understanding of the development of the self. Three personality types: resilient, overcontrolled, and undercontrolled were identified in a longitudinal study of 128 Icelandic seven year old

children. Children were assessed through the age of 15, and the relation of personality type to adolescent development was examined. The resilient children had more success in school, which continued into mid-adolescence. The overcontrolled children showed consistent difficulties across childhood and adolescence in engaging in successful interaction. Their anxiety and fearfulness were reflected in consistently low self-esteem scores. The undercontrolled children had significantly higher levels of aggressive behavior, along with negative, aversive interactions with others. It is interesting to note that the undercontrolled children also maintained high levels of self-esteem throughout the course of the study. This higher score suggests that their problems in adaptation do not necessarily influence their own self-conceptions. It is suggested that the undercontrolled type may not be aware of their problems in adaptation (Hart et al., 1997).

### **Factors Associated with Self-Esteem**

A longitudinal study on the self-esteem of adolescents reported the following results: youth with high levels of self-esteem were less susceptible to peer pressure over time than youth with low or decreasing levels of self-esteem; school grades were correlated positively with self-esteem; alcohol use, alcohol misuse, and tolerance for deviance were highest among those with lower self-esteem and least among those with high self-esteem (Zimmerman et al., 1997). Other positive factors that are significantly associated with high self-esteem are adolescents' caring about others (Perry & McIntire, 1995), and their level of empathetic concern (Henry, 1996).

A study intended to predict global self-worth and academic performance among regular education, learning disabled, and continuation high school students examined measures of perceived competence, control, autonomy support, and the ability to cope with academic demands. Social competence, academic competence, and perceived control were all positively associated with self-worth. In addition, peer autonomy, coping, and teacher support were also significant predictors of self-worth. Depression was negatively associated with self-worth and correlated with poor academic achievement. It seems that students who become discouraged when faced with social and academic challenges demonstrate negative affect, have low expectations of future success, and subsequently low self-worth (Weist, Wong, & Kreil, 1998).

Bjistra, Bosma, and Jackson (1994) conducted a study with the purpose of investigating the relationship between social skills and aspects of psycho-social functioning of normal adolescents in normal circumstances. The four indicators of psycho-social functioning were self-esteem, well-being, coping, and social support. These four aspects have all been associated with well-adjusted functioning in adolescence. Results suggested that individuals with adequate social skills were effective in social interactions, which enhanced their self-esteem. Furthermore, the combination of adequate social skills and feelings of self-esteem had a positive influence on well-being. Correlational and regression analysis showed that self-esteem was related to anxiety and performance in social situations. The researchers concluded that adolescents who are anxious in social situations have lower self-esteem, while those more active in social situations have higher self-esteem.

Adolescence is a time when young people must re-define themselves in many areas. A high level of self-esteem is especially necessary in order for adolescents to make adequate choices, but it is a time when self-esteem is likely to fluctuate. A longitudinal study of a general population of early adolescents was conducted over a three year period. Information was obtained on global changes in self-esteem in early adolescence, ways in which young people perceive themselves, differences between boys and girls regarding self-esteem, and the relationship between self-esteem and mental health. Although results indicated only very small changes in global feelings of self-worth, self-esteem ratings in the domains of appearance and social competence went down, while scholastic competence ratings increased. Findings also showed that girls tended to have a poorer self-esteem than boys in all domains taken into consideration. Other conclusions were that self-esteem plays an important role in mental health, especially depressive mood, and that perceived social support also has an effect on self-esteem (Bolognini et al., 1996).

Another longitudinal analysis examined gender differences and whether self-esteem, as well as locus of control, changed during the high school years. This study found no significant gender differences in locus of control, but a trend toward less external locus of control for each year during the high school years for the total sample. Self-esteem was stable for males and females during the four years of high school, but males had significantly higher self-esteem than did females. Previous studies which addressed the question of whether self-esteem changes over time have produced conflicting results, but one consistent finding among research projects that



evaluated gender differences in self-esteem is that adolescent females score lower on self-esteem than do adolescent males (Chubb, Fertman, & Ross, 1997). It is interesting to note that most of the research on self-esteem in the elementary school years has found no gender differences (Simmons & Rosenberg, 1975). The reasons for lower self-esteem in high school girls need further exploration.

As adolescents make the transition to adulthood, theories note that need satisfaction and identity formation are essential to psychological well-being in which the person is free from negative states such as depression and lack of self-esteem. Current vocational theory assumes that the adolescent has ample opportunity to fulfill these needs in the school environment, and replaces this source with satisfactory employment. To determine factors that affect well-being throughout this transition, Borgen, Amundson, & Tench (1996) conducted a study that followed 172 high school leavers over a two year period. High school leavers included individuals who were graduating from high school and progressing to further schooling, to work or were unemployed. Unexpected results indicated that employment and school continuation were unrelated to self-esteem and depression during the transition period explored in this study. Factors that influenced well-being included difficulties with finances and finding meaningful activities to gain personal enjoyment and to prevent boredom. It was also suggested that external attributions during the transition process had more of an impact on positive well-being than did internal attributions, and that an individual's perception that general transition difficulties result from stable causes reduces hope for future improvement, and negatively affects psychological well-being.

## **Causes of Low Self-Esteem**

Self-perception and relationships with others affect an individual's level of self-acceptance and self-esteem. There are a variety of factors that influence the development of the self, but generally, psychological maladjustment occurs when there is a discrepancy between the self one is being in relationship to others, and the self that one currently perceives or wants to become (Rice, 1990). Adolescent self-esteem seems to be most threatened when numerous developmental and social changes occur simultaneously. Developmental theorists have increased their focus on risk factors that influence self-concept and have an effect on developmental outcomes for adolescents (Diehl, Vicary, & Deike, 1997).

Results of a study on the relationship between stress and self-concept among adolescents indicated a relationship between overall self-concept and the frequency and effect of stressful events. It was also reported that females experience more stress and it has a greater negative impact on them (Garton & Pratt, 1995). Another research study conducted by Wenz-Gross & Siperstein (1998) revealed that middle school students with learning problems experienced higher academic stress, peer stress, and teacher/rules stress than other students. In addition, a clear and very strong relationship was found between academic stress and feelings about the self. The researchers suggested that these students' problems with academics are internalized and contribute to the frequently cited problems these students have in terms of self-concept and depression.

School-related stress is of particular concern because it has been shown to be

negatively related to several measures of school functioning and well-being, including self-perceptions of ability and self-esteem. Negative feedback from teachers about classroom behavior and performance is likely to have adverse effects on perceptions of self-worth. If students believe that they are unable to meet the difficult demands of school, they can suffer from low perceptions of competence and worth. Disapproval from significant peers can also negatively affect perceptions of self-worth. The relationship between these three sources of strain; peer relations, teacher relations, and academic demands, and self-worth were examined at the beginning and end of the school year as part of a study that involved 102 average academic track urban middle school students. Results showed that self-worth was significantly related to strains associated with peer relations and school demands at the beginning of the year. By the end of the school year, even though strains in all three areas increased, the only significant correlation related to self-worth was peer relations strain. The finding that the relation between school demands strain and self-worth was significant at the beginning of the school year but not found at the end of the year suggests that students restructure their appraisals of the importance of succeeding in school so as not to damage their self-worth perceptions. However, the increase in the negative relation between peer strain and self-worth found at the end of the school year highlights the importance of positive feedback from valued peers to early adolescents' self-worth evaluations (Fenzel, Magaletta, & Peyrot, 1997).

A study that focused on adolescents who based their self-worth on peer approval found that these students were more likely to be distracted from schoolwork

and to report lower levels of classmate approval and self-worth as compared to students with other relationship orientations (Harter, 1996). Another investigation on how peer acceptance and friendship were related to self-esteem in adolescents indicated that subjects in this study with one friend had higher self-esteem than subjects with no friends (Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995).

Another area of concern that has been investigated is employment. A greater proportion of adolescents than at any time during the past 40 years are now working part-time. In one national study of high school seniors, only 7% said they had not worked for pay. These high rates of adolescent employment are a unique aspect of adolescence in the United States, as they do not exist in other industrialized countries. The effects of working on high school students are mixed. Some studies have indicated that working may have a positive impact on adolescents, but evidence also indicates that part-time work can have negative effects, especially if the time spent working exceeds 20 hours a week. One major study of 10th to 12th grade students found that working was significantly related to a drop in grade point average and time spent on homework. In addition, results of this study cited more absence from school, an association with drug and alcohol use, increased psychological distress, and lower self-esteem for those who worked over 20 hours a week (Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991).

An additional study that focused on the work place explored the self-esteem of a large group (N=3066) who recently left high school. Results indicated that the self-esteem of economically underemployed groups was significantly lower as compared to

the adequately employed (Prause & Dooley, 1997).

### **Consequences of Low Self-Esteem**

Many adolescents who are not successful in school develop low self-esteem, and the subsequent failure to realize their intellectual potential can have long-lasting effects. Longitudinal studies confirm that performance in high school predicts how successful students will be in college or work. In one study, the academic performance of 6,720 high school juniors and seniors was compared with their occupational status 13 years later. The early adult accomplishments of these young people were more closely related to their grades earned in high school than to their level of intelligence. Bright students who had received lower grades than would have been expected based on their mental abilities were holding lower status jobs and earning less money than students of equal ability who performed better in high school. They also completed fewer years of postsecondary education and were less likely to graduate from college than students of similar ability who worked to their capacity during high school and therefore received better grades. The results of this study reported that a small percentage of young people who fail to use their abilities in high school may later on achieve educational and occupational goals consistent with their abilities. However, for most students, the achievement level set in high school predicts the occurrence of later accomplishments, despite the person's level of ability (McCall, Evahan, & Kratzer, 1992).

Several studies have indicated that negative self-perceptions are related to

undesirable and possibly dangerous behaviors. An examination of the relationship between adolescent self-esteem and smoking among a large cohort of adolescents between the 6th and 10th grades found that females with low self-esteem from grades 6 to 8 are three times as likely to smoke as those with high self-esteem (Abernathy, Massad, & Romano-Dwyer, 1995). Low self-efficacy was identified as an unconditional emergent risk factor for increased binge drinking of adolescents over time. This same report also mentions research that has shown that low internal control is related to alcohol and other drug use during adolescence and young adulthood (Schulenberg et al., 1996). Surveys of nearly 500 middle-class high school students resulted in the finding that marijuana users displayed more hostility and lower self-esteem than did nonusers (Green, Blake, & Zenhausern, 1973). This information suggests that drug and health education programs should attempt to improve self-concept, rather than simply provide information.

The purpose of another study was to investigate how cognitive processes which have been found in depressed adults may contribute to depression in adolescence. Participants included 45 primarily female adolescents ranging from 13 to 16 years of age. Results revealed that one of the major contributing factors to clinical depression in adolescents is low self-esteem. The findings are in agreement with other cognitive studies on depression that show strong evidence to support a direct relationship between negative self-concept and degree of adolescent depression (Hammond & Romney, 1995).

## **Successful Programs and Strategies**

There have been several projects in recent years that show promise for increasing the self-esteem of adolescents. One successful program studied the effects of social skills training with normal 14 to 16 year olds. The training was given at secondary schools in groups of 7 to 9 participants for 10 weekly meetings of about 2 hours each. There were 37 participants in the training group and 37 in the non-intervention control group. Self-reported effects were assessed on social anxiety and activity, self-esteem, well-being, and coping. The results showed that the training was successful in several respects. The adolescents' social anxiety decreased, while their self-esteem improved, and they made greater use of adequate coping strategies (Bjistra & Jackson, 1998).

A group of early adolescents with low self-esteem who were not achieving in school, even though they had been successful in elementary school, were the participants in a study conducted by Crittenden, Kaplan, & Heim (1984). The students attended a short course of seven weekly sessions that lasted two hours each. To facilitate the development of study skills and written language competence, the curriculum included experience with structured study methods, report writing, book reports, and creative written expression. To encourage the development of confidence, self-appraisal, and decision-making, students were asked to evaluate the factors that helped and hindered them with school assignments. Special attention was given to time management, and behavior management involving plans for self-improvement. Students were encouraged to use newly learned skills in school and at home, and

expected to report on their effectiveness. The teachers in this study provided positive verbal rewards for efforts and accomplishments, and clear cut limits were maintained in a warm, supportive manner. An assessment of the program through the use of pre- and post-tests revealed that it appeared to improve self-concept, written language, and study skills in these students. This pilot study showed that existing needs of students could be met through a relatively brief intervention.

Network in the Schools (NIS) is a recognized effective curriculum and cost-efficient community-based project that leads to improved academic achievement and self-esteem among school children in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Soweto, South Africa. The project focuses on the strengths of young people through the use of small group discussions regarding self-affirmation, social concerns, self-improvement, and reflection. Additional time is spent in meetings for group sharing and self-expression. It is reported that the social and academic climate in all classrooms has improved as students realize that they can succeed through caring, sharing, and cooperation. Several studies have been conducted to examine the effects of the NIS program. The results of these studies have shown that the NIS experience not only raised self esteem scores, but strengthened language arts and mathematics performance as well (Tobias & Turner, 1997).

Significant increases in global self-esteem and subdomains of physical self-worth were measured in 66 males and 60 females with a mean age of 15 years who participated in a Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme expedition. These results indicate that adventure education can be a vehicle for personal and social development



in adolescence (Gibbs & Bunyan, 1997).

Students in grades 11 and 12 with below average self-esteem were categorized by gender and randomly assigned to either computer-based restructuring or a relaxation-training control group. The computer intervention targeted irrational beliefs linked to low self-esteem, and results indicated that the computer-based technique improved self-esteem (Horan, 1996).

There are also certain classroom techniques that promote positive affect in students. Research on cooperative learning methods in secondary schools supports the usefulness of those methods for improving student achievement at a variety of grade levels and in many subjects, and for improving intergroup relations and the self-esteem of students. Pupils in cooperative learning classes have been found to have more positive feelings about themselves than do students in traditional classes. They also tend to be more cooperative and altruistic, and have more positive attitudes toward school (Slavin, 1996).

In contrast to these findings, results of a recently conducted study of 12 self-contained special education high school classes indicated that increased self-esteem in cooperative learning students was not found. However, cooperative learning was more effective than traditional noncooperative learning in improving academic achievement in these students with learning disabilities (Brandt & Ellsworth, 1997). According to several authorities, including Baymur and Patterson (1960), any method improving achievement also improves self-concept.

The affective domain is receiving increased attention in the field of education

due to research findings that are discovering important relationships between affect and cognitive processes. Bryan, Mathur, and Sullivan (1996) reported that positive affective states have been found to increase performance on various tasks, such as memory, computation, and discrimination tasks. In addition, their research indicated that inducing positive feelings in children facilitated the learning of new information. Most of the studies involving students have used a self-generated visualization method to induce positive moods, and effects have been demonstrated across a two week time span. The authors suggest that the benefits of positive mood on learning and performance should continue to be tested, but if results continue to be promising, induced positive affect could be employed as a useful classroom strategy. This could be especially beneficial for students with learning disabilities who experience significantly more negative and depressed affect than their nondisabled peers.

### **Negative Aspects of Self-Esteem**

Since the early 1960's, psychologists have regarded self-esteem as the indispensable ingredient in mental health. Those who possessed it were bound to succeed and those with low self-esteem were doomed to failure. However, this view is changing as a result of research studies on the relationship between self-esteem and violence (Ruggiero, 1998). Stanton Samenow, an expert on criminal behavior, has found that rapists, kidnappers, and child molesters generally do not have a negative self-image. They see themselves as decent human beings, but decide that they are exceptions to the law and the moral code. Samenow (1984) explains that a criminal "believes he is entitled to whatever he desires, and he will pursue it ruthlessly... [He]

does not regard himself as obligated to anyone and rarely justifies his actions to himself."

Researchers who once claimed to find connections between low self-esteem and gang violence, domestic abuse, terrorism, armed robbery, murder, hate crimes, and child abuse have now reached a number of different conclusions. They contend that people with favorable opinions of themselves have a greater desire for self-enhancement and are more sensitive to criticism than those with low self-esteem. They continue by explaining that aggression, crime and violence are not caused by low self-esteem but by threatened egotism, and egotism is most likely to be threatened when people make unrealistic positive appraisals. It is recommended that therapy for such people should not include building self-esteem because they already feel superior to other people. Treatment should consist of "cultivating self-control and instilling modesty and humility" (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996).

Perhaps this perspective can help to explain why the research on the associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed. For example, Stanley, Dai, & Nolan (1997) examined the differences in level of self-reported self-esteem between middle school students with learning disabilities and same age students with behavior disorders. Results indicated that the students with behavior disorders reported unrealistically high self-esteem, while the students with learning disabilities reported significantly lower self-esteem than did the students with behavior disorders.

Recent accounts of the adaptive significance of self-esteem during childhood

and adolescence have varied, and created the emergence of a self-esteem debate. On one side, self-esteem is portrayed as a powerful positive influence on youth adjustment. In contrast, the other view is that hypothesized effects of self-esteem do not exist at all. Empirical findings suggest that both perspectives are oversimplified and inaccurate. The implications of self-esteem during childhood and adolescence are complex and range from highly beneficial to possibly even negative. Recent results indicate that the most useful investigations occur within the contexts of broader frameworks that allow for the consideration of the interdependent relationships of self-esteem with other aspects of the developing self (Dubois & Tevendale, 1999).

In an effort to dispel myths about "feel good" self-esteem, Owens (1997) has presented a more dynamic component which is referred to as "inner self-esteem". She claims that inner self-esteem is enhanced by helping children develop skills to succeed in school and by fostering morally responsible behavior. It appears that many investigators are incorporating these ideas into their projects.

The effectiveness of a part-time challenge-based intervention program for at-risk adolescent girls was investigated. The program utilized a cognitive framework that encouraged students' use of reflection, verbalization, planning skills and application of effort. The results demonstrated that specific facets of self-concept were enhanced due to the intervention. The findings support the use of overt verbalization in learning to improve self-control, and the use of reflective thinking and planning to increase students' self-confidence and achievement motivation (Lockhart & Hay, 1995).

The effects of participation in a school-based helper program on adolescents'

self-image, attitudes, and behaviors resulted in a finding that seventh-grade boys in the helper program showed positive changes in self-esteem, as compared to other groups who did not engage in volunteer helping activities (Switzer, 1995).

An investigation of the relationship between academic achievement, motivation, and self-esteem was conducted with 289 high school students who were 14 and 15 years old. Results showed that those who imagined themselves achieving as a result of hard work outperformed the other groups in academic achievement and persistence on tasks (Leonardi, Syngollitou & Kiosseoglou, 1998).

Students attending a school for the learning disabled built a hockey table during a workshop period. Completion of the project involved motor coordination, planning, measuring, assigning tasks, coordinating efforts, motivating, and self-analyzing strengths and weaknesses. The project promoted a sense of identity, better peer interactions, and an enhanced self-image (Kosmakos & Decker, 1977).

### **Self-Esteem of Individuals with Learning Disabilities**

Much research has demonstrated that students with learning disabilities experience emotional distress related to their difficulties. Students with learning disabilities tend to have higher levels of emotional concerns, such as depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem, than do their peers without disabilities (Gorman, 1999). Emotional problems in general have been found in as many as 76% of children with learning disabilities, and certain symptoms of depression, such as low self-esteem, are said to be common among this population (Livingston, 1985). Research has also

indicated that the social-emotional development of students with learning disabilities may be more severely impaired during adolescence and early adulthood than previously thought (Bender & Wall, 1994).

Within the domain of emotional development, one of the most frequently examined affective traits of students with learning disabilities is their self-concept (Sabornie, 1994). Self-concept has been described in the literature as self-evaluation, self-esteem, self-awareness, self-understanding, self-perception, self-worth, and self-image. Studies have indicated that youth with learning disabilities exhibit lower self-concept and lower perceived competence than their nondisabled peers. In addition, research has suggested that lower overall self-concept negatively affects social behavior and academic achievement, and the lower their self-concept, the more likely they are to attribute failure to ability. (Bender & Wall, 1994).

*Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory* was used to measure self-esteem in 30 males with specific learning disabilities and 30 without learning disabilities at each of two grade levels. The mean self-esteem score of 6th graders with specific learning disabilities was significantly lower than those without problems. The difference for adolescents was not significant, but was in the same direction. However, the scores for 9th graders were lower than those of the corresponding groups of 6th graders (Bingham, 1980). Thomson and Harley (as cited in Hiebert et al., 1982). also reported similar differences in Coopersmith scores between dyslexic and nondyslexic English school children.

Similarities and differences in the domain-specific and global self-evaluations

of 235 normally achieving, 118 learning disabled, and 70 behaviorally disordered adolescents in the 9th to 12th grades were documented. Participants completed the *Self Perception Profile for Adolescents*, and factor analysis revealed 8 discrete self-concept domains for each group. Students with high self-worth evaluated themselves positively in domains of importance, while students with low self-worth reported much less favorable self-evaluations. Those with high self-worth were also better able to discount areas of weakness than were those with low self-worth. Students with learning disabilities and behavior disorders reported lower cognitive competence and peer likability than did normally achieving students, and both special education groups evidenced more negative self-worth with greater discrepancies between importance and negative self-evaluations (Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998).

There have been other studies that have not shown significant differences in the global self-concept of students with learning disabilities as compared with the nondisabled population. In an examination of social-affective characteristics, Sabornie (1994) obtained measures of self-concept and levels of participation, integration and victimization by administering subtests of the *Background and Outcome Survey* to 76 sixth and seventh grade students with and without learning disabilities. Self-concept was also measured using the Simmons modification of the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*, which is comprised of six questions addressing respondents' global non-school-related self-esteem. Overall, students identified as learning disabled expressed more loneliness, felt less integrated in their schools, were victimized more often, and participated in fewer activities than their nondisabled peers. However, the comparison

groups did not differ significantly in self-concept. These results demonstrated that early adolescents with and without learning disabilities are quite different with regard to certain social-affective traits. The single similarity between students with and without learning disabilities relates to self-concept, which leads to the implication that non-school based perceptions of self among students with learning disabilities are not consistently negative (Sabornie, 1994).

One of the purposes of a dissertation study was to investigate the relationship between the self-esteem of students with and without learning disabilities, and perceptions of how their parents, teachers, and peers evaluate them. Adolescents' self-esteem and their perceptions of how they are perceived by others were assessed using the *Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale*. There was no significant difference in self-esteem between adolescents with learning disabilities and non-learning disabled students, even though the students with learning disabilities were significantly less successful in school than non-disabled peers, as measured by grade point average. Findings of this study also reported no differences in the self-esteem of males and females (Epstein-Browell, 1994).

An additional study designed to assess the social acceptance and self-esteem of adolescents with learning disabilities was conducted by Matis (1984). It was hypothesized that adolescents with learning problems would be lower in actual as well as perceived social acceptance, and less able to accurately perceive their social status in a classroom than their non-disabled peers. It was also believed that the low status of the students with learning disabilities would limit the degree of intimacy within



friendships and therefore reduce self-esteem. Using class lists and various instruments, students evaluated themselves and their classmates. The data indicated two unexpected outcomes: adolescents with learning disabilities view themselves as similar to peers in perceived social acceptance, and evaluate themselves like other peers in measures of self-esteem (Matis, 1984).

Another inconsistent finding appeared in the results of another study designed to compare the subjective experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities to those of their low and normally achieving peers. Each group of high school juniors and seniors were given electronic pagers and booklets for one week. They were signaled every 40 minutes during school hours and every two hours after school, and instructed to respond to questions in their booklets as soon as possible after receiving the signal. The questions provided subjective measures on levels of affect, activation, cognitive efficiency, self-esteem, motivation, and feedback from others. The students with learning disabilities reported feeling more positive and active than either of the other groups during school hours, while after school there were no differences on any of the subjective measures for the three groups (McPhail, 1993).

Investigations focusing on affective variables usually include some assessment of self-concept. Self-concept may be seen in general terms or it can be conceptualized as having many subcomponents. One of the categories of general self-concept is academic self-concept, which refers to students' perceptions of themselves as learners. The *Student's Perception of Ability Scale*, an instrument which contains items asking participants about their perceptions of their general ability, their perceived abilities in

math, reading, spelling, and penmanship, their school satisfaction, neatness, and confidence in their academic ability, is designed to isolate academic self-concept so it can be studied. It was the assessment tool used to investigate the academic self-concept and academic expectations of students with learning disabilities and normally achieving adolescents. The researchers restricted their investigation and predictions to academic self-concept rather than general self-concept because they claimed that there is no basis for thinking that adolescents with learning disabilities should have a negative self-concept in areas other than academics. The results of this study indicated that students with learning disabilities had significantly lower academic self-concepts and academic expectations than did their normally achieving peers (Hiebert, Wong, & Hunter, 1982).

Research to examine the self-perceptions of adolescents identified as behaviorally disabled, learning disabled, and normally achieving used measures designed to capture the complexity of adolescents' self perceptions. Several findings were reported, including results that revealed that normally achieving students had the highest perceptions of competence in the academic domains, followed by the behaviorally disabled group, with students with learning disabilities having the lowest perceptions of academic competence (Junkin, 1992).

Another study designed to examine self-esteem among the population with learning disabilities yielded results similar to those previously mentioned. The purpose of this project was to identify the variables that are most predictive of overall self-esteem and describe its relationship to prior psychosocial crisis resolution.

Adolescents with learning disabilities were not found to experience lower overall self-esteem than the normative sample, but did score lower on academic self-esteem. Self-esteem was found to be strongly related to psychosocial maturity, which emerged as the first predictor on a multiple regression analysis. Other predictors of self-esteem included a positive affective orientation to school, a high level of aspiration, and a low need for and use of extra help with school work (Knack, 1992).

It has been suggested that because students with learning disabilities experience underachievement in school situations, their academic self-concept is lower than their general self-esteem. This notion, coupled with the findings concerning various other social and affective difficulties of students with learning disabilities, show how important it is for educators to understand and address the emotional aspects of learning disabilities. Hiebert et al. (1982) suggested that teachers should systematically build "positive affect and hopeful expectation, utilizing self-instruction or some other procedure for promoting positive affect". Sabornie (1994) expressed this need even more strongly when he stated that, "Educators lack of concern for social-affective problems among pupils is analogous to educational neglect".

### **Successful Programs and Strategies for Students with Learning Disabilities**

Interventions aimed at improving self-concept in students with learning disabilities have yielded mixed results. Those that involve rational-emotive education and group counseling seem to be more effective (Bender & Wall, 1994). For example, four boys and four girls from 13 to 17 years of age with learning disabilities were

interviewed upon completion of psychodynamic group therapy to obtain their perspectives of the group. Results indicated that the participants regarded the therapy as beneficial, and the phenomenon of "mutual recognition" led to enhanced self-esteem and an increased ability to relate to peers (Mishna, 1996).

Much of the literature concerning education for adolescents with learning disabilities has focused on the development of academic and social skills, or enhancing their motivation to gain knowledge. More in-depth explorations of student perceptions reveal a need for a sense of social and emotional security. Although it is the responsibility of educators to teach academics, the environments created by teachers may have a more substantial impact on the lives of students than the academics they master. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that students positively develop in the affective domain. The affective dimension includes factors such as intrinsic motivation, internal locus of control, academic and social self-concept, self-esteem, a sense of competence and confidence, willingness to take risks, and a sense of personal power. Based on research and interactions with outstanding teachers, Ellis (1998) has developed affective goals and instructional procedures that address both academic learning and the affective component of the environment.

He recommends that teachers strive to create settings where students feel safe to take risks with their understanding. One way this can be accomplished is to place less emphasis on dichotomous evaluation where responses are either right or wrong, and greater emphasis on allowing students to move from erroneous thinking to more precise and accurate understandings. He also states that reflection and student

participation are powerful tools to use in the classroom. The application of cooperative learning techniques is strongly suggested, but it must be "effectively employed". In many cases, students have to be taught to work together or the results could be disastrous for students with learning difficulties. For example, if these students believe they are a liability to the cooperative learning team, their self-efficacy, sense of personal power, and self-esteem could be negatively affected. He also warns that success at easy tasks or assignments that lack personal meaning are not likely to increase academic self-esteem, and that failure to provide information concerning their disabilities can impair the development of personal power. To further enhance self-development, adolescents with learning disabilities should be taught to become their own self-advocates. Ellis continues by stating that in an effective classroom that promotes affective development and healthy self-concepts, tasks are challenging, expectations are high, goals are set and monitored regularly, students are evaluated often, feedback on performance is meaningful, success is attainable for all students, sufficient practice is provided, and experiences are interesting and meaningful. A significant body of research is also mentioned that showed that "the quality of interactions between teachers and students, regardless of their respective labels, is the single most predictive variable in successful classroom learning" (Ellis, 1998).

One study investigated the effects of a 20 session Self-Advocacy Training Program (SATP) on the self-esteem of 30 secondary school students with learning disabilities. Self-esteem for the experimental and control group was assessed through the use of the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory*. The effects of the program

on grade-point average was also examined. The SATP was designed to help students with learning disabilities to understand their learning problems, to educate them on laws that affect disabled populations, and to enable them to recognize their personal learning styles and strengths. Cognitive teaching techniques were used to help students learn compensatory skills and coping strategies. Group discussion, group interaction exercises, and role playing were employed to assist students in becoming more comfortable speaking out for themselves. Students also examined sample Individualized Education Plans and educational reports, and were encouraged to examine their personal records. One-tailed t tests at the .05 level were used to test the significance of differences between mean Coopersmith scores of the experimental and control groups. Compared to the control group, a significantly higher score was achieved after treatment by the experimental group in both self-esteem and grade-point average. Therefore, the SATP appears to have had a positive effect on both self-esteem and success in school for secondary students with learning disabilities (Bullock, 1993).

Similar factors were explored in the case study of a 14 year old male high school student with learning disabilities. This young man had learned not to expect success in school, and really did not expect much of himself. He did not believe he could learn and did not know how to go about learning the increasing variety of skills required of him in high school. Remediation of basic skills and tutoring were strategies that could have been implemented, but it was believed that they may not have been the best use of time, and may not result in long-lasting gains. Instead,

learning and coping strategies that have been developed at the University of Kansas Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities were taught. These cognitive strategies are tactics and skills that can be used to effectively gain information from texts, to perform accurately on tests, to write more efficiently, to present written work more attractively, and to more successfully deal with the process of learning in general. These methods have been tested and modified to provide useful, easily transferable skills that can be generalized and can lead to independent learning. This cognitive approach has helped students much like the young man in the case study to experience significantly increased success and to realize potential that may never have been expected (Wiens, 1983).

Another study investigated the effects of the use of a highly structured, personally tailored enrichment program on the attitudes, self-concepts, and creative productivity of 108 students who were identified as being gifted and having learning disabilities. After participating in a year long program based on The Schoolwide Enrichment Model, students demonstrated significant positive results relative to attitudes toward school. Students who participated in the enrichment program, which included an organized, regular sequence of enrichment experiences, demonstrated statistically significant gains in self-concept between the pretest and posttest administration of the *Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale* (Olenchak, 1995).

A theme of lowered self-concept occurred repeatedly for participants in a qualitative study of twelve high ability young people with learning disabilities. Negative school experiences, such as social problems, difficulty with teachers, and

frustration with certain academic areas resulted in a lack of confidence about their abilities. However, despite these experiences, these students were successful at the college level due to their participation in a University Learning Disability Program. They employed compensation strategies such as, use of computers, word processing, books on tape, and self-advocacy. They also used learning strategies that included methods of learning to study, note taking, and identifying key points. Achievement was also attributed to effective time management, and setting goals and work priorities. All participants also mentioned the program director as having a positive impact on them and contributing to their success (Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1997).

Other studies have also focused on the college experiences of individuals with learning disabilities. Specific differences have been identified between students with learning disabilities who graduated from college and those who did not. Findings indicated that students with learning disabilities who graduated had better oral language skills and demonstrated a more positive self-concept, as evidenced by a higher level of motivation and more positive attitudes toward learning, than did their counterparts who did not obtain a college degree. Some participants stated reasons for not wanting to attend college. These centered on issues of self-efficacy and symptoms of low self-concept: "I thought I couldn't make it through," "I was not a great student," "I was a bad kid .....I thought I couldn't learn." One of the keys to success depended on participants' knowledge about their disability. The researchers contend that acceptance and self-awareness of the impact of a learning disability may help one to recognize strengths, accurately assess limitations, and make appropriate



accommodations to achieve personal goals. The findings of this study also suggest that self-understanding and self-determination are extremely important to the academic and vocational success of people with learning disabilities. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that self-awareness and decision-making skills of people with learning disabilities can be improved through instructional interventions (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995).

Many of the preceding statements are in agreement with the findings from an ethnographic study of 71 successful adults with learning disabilities. One of the adults in this study stated, "Learning disabled people need to be taught strategies to anticipate problems." Teachers can help students in this area by involving them in activities that emphasize the importance and usefulness of advance planning based on reasonable estimates of possible outcomes. Successful adults made it clear that their success was based in their desire to succeed. Educators can help to motivate students to want to succeed by rewarding desire and effort, emphasizing process rather than only product, and providing opportunities for success. Goal orientation was another factor associated with success in adulthood. Strategies that help students become goal oriented include applying the concept of task analysis to the goal-setting process, and helping students choose reasonable and logical goals that take individual strengths and differences into account. Participants in the study had a proactive outlook as a result of reframing the learning disabilities experience. Students need a setting where they can learn to recognize, accept, and understand their disabilities so they can formulate plans of action. It is also important to emphasize self-responsibility; blame and excuse

making can lead to learned helplessness. Successful adults demonstrated that adaptability within the environment was an additional key to success. Students must have experiences that will heighten their sense of resiliency, determination, persistence, and the ability to cope with failure. Goodness of fit is another concept that has relevance for individuals with learning disabilities. It is important to choose work or school environments that maximize potential while minimizing the effects of weaknesses. The adults in this study often developed and used interpersonal support systems. One of the elements of creating a network of helpful people was the ability to self-advocate. Teachers can provide support that will bolster students' self-esteem by working with parents to develop realistic expectations, becoming advocates for students, providing a safe place to work out personal issues, and making use of cooperative learning experiences that allow supportive interactions. The use of these strategies is likely to improve the chances that students with learning disabilities will be successful (Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1996).

### **Summary**

This review of literature has demonstrated with few exceptions that the development of a healthy self-concept and a high level of self-esteem are important to the successful development of adolescents. Self-esteem is a factor associated with several other concepts, such as self-determination, self-awareness, and identity formation. In addition, it affects the functioning of adolescents in the family, the school, and the workplace.

The development of self-esteem is not totally understood, but recent research in

brain chemistry suggests that serotonin level may play a part in an individual's level of self-esteem. Another possible explanation is that characteristics associated with personality types can contribute to self development. Factors that have been found to relate to high levels of self-esteem include: low susceptibility to peer pressure, social and academic competence, a perceived sense of control, coping ability, and adequate support systems.

Studies that have focused on changes in the self-esteem of adolescents have produced mixed results, but one rather consistent finding is that adolescent females score lower on measures of self-esteem than do adolescent males. Many other possible causes for low self-esteem in adolescence have been identified in research projects. They include: stress, negative feedback about school performance, difficult academic demands, peer disapproval, lack of friendship, working more than 20 hours a week, underemployment, and difficulty with finances and finding meaningful activities. Possible consequences of negative self-perceptions among young people that have been mentioned in literature are a higher incidence of smoking, drug and alcohol use, clinical depression, and low occupational status in adulthood.

Programs that have reported successful results in the affective area have focused on social skills training, improvement in study skills, academics, and learning strategies, self-improvement, adventure education, and computer intervention. Promising findings have also been discovered through the inclusion of positive affective states and cooperative learning methods in the classroom.

On the other hand, there is a body of research that associates high self-esteem

with criminal and immoral behavior which has led to a debate about the true significance of self-esteem. However, projects that have incorporated the development of skills and responsible behavior have produced desirable effects.

Several research studies have investigated the emotional development of adolescents with learning disabilities, and self-esteem is one of the most frequently examined traits of this population. While many findings report more negative self-concepts and lower self-esteem among students with learning disabilities as compared to their nondisabled peers, others have not shown any significant differences. However, when investigations were restricted to academic self-concept rather than global self-esteem, youth with learning disabilities consistently scored lower than their normally achieving counterparts. Results suggested that although underachievement in school can affect academic self-esteem, other areas of life may not necessarily be influenced by a learning disability.

Various interventions aimed at improving the self-esteem of students with learning disabilities have been successful. The existence of support systems, enrichment experiences, instruction in compensation strategies, learning strategies, and cognitive strategies, and the use of cooperative learning methods have had a positive effect on both self-esteem and success in school. Increased self-awareness, responsibility, the attainment of goal setting, time management, and decision making skills, and knowledge about one's disability also promote affective development and healthy self-concepts. A few other effective interventions include group counseling, rational-emotive education, and self-advocacy training.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Design of the Study**

#### **Setting**

The study was conducted in the special education resource centers at a high school in Salem County, New Jersey. The school was located in a rural-residential community which included a small borough and a larger surrounding township. The population of the area was 6,789 with an average of 3.1 persons per household. The majority of full-time working citizens had completed high school, and approximately 40% had graduated from college. Most were employed as craftsmen, professionals, or quasi-professionals, and the median family income was \$43,229 (Hornor, 1999).

The regional school district consisted of one elementary school which served 460 students, one middle school with an enrollment of 416, and the high school, which also received students from two elementary school sending districts. The enrollment at the high school was 802 (Monthly Report, September, 1999).

Approximately 48 percent of the high school students planned to attend a four year college or university; 31 percent had plans of continuing their education at a community college or other post-secondary school; 14 percent intended to enter the work force after graduation; 2 percent were considering military service and 5 percent were undecided about their future (New Jersey School Report Card, 1997-98).

There were 94 special education students at the high school, but 2 of these pupils did not receive any services because they had been completely mainstreamed into regular high school classes. The remaining 92 students attended one of the five resource centers in the high school for part of the school day. Forty-three percent of these students attended a vocational training program at an off-site campus on a half-day basis, while the remaining 57 percent were enrolled in mainstream classes at the high school. Seventy-eight of these pupils were classified as having specific learning disabilities, 8 had been identified with behavior disorders, 7 were labeled as individuals with multiple disabilities, and one student was classified as auditorially impaired. (Special Education Placement List, 1999-2000).

### **Sample Population**

The 48 participants (24 experimental, 24 control) in this study had all been evaluated by a Child Study Team, and classified as having a learning deficit which interfered with their ability to process information adequately. All of the students attended a Study Skills class in the resource center every day, and 9 of them also received primary academic instruction in the resource center during one or two additional class periods.

The experimental group consisted of 17 males and 7 females. The majority of these students (19) were Caucasian; the group also contained one Latino and 4 African-American students. The control group contained 15 males and 9 females, and was comprised of 20 Caucasian, one African-American, one Asian, and 2 Latino

students. The ages of both groups of participants ranged from fourteen to eighteen years old.

## **Procedures**

A selected group of 48 high school students, who had been classified as having learning disabilities, completed the *Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory* during the first full week of the beginning of the school year. The students were told that the purpose of this self-report instrument was to help the teacher get to know them better, and to gain information that would contribute to the appropriate selection of classroom activities. All statements were read silently by the students, and responses were self-recorded. In the few instances that students did not comprehend the statement, items were paraphrased.

All students attended a daily Study Skills class where they were assisted in academic tasks as needed. Twenty-four of these students were assigned to one teacher and they served as the control group. The experimental group consisted of the remaining twenty-four students, and they received instruction from a different teacher. In addition to getting help with assignments from mainstream classes, the experimental group also participated in daily structured classroom activities designed to improve self-concept. Treatment for the experimental group took place over a period of 15 weeks, and included 50 classroom lessons (Appendix A) aimed at improving the level of self-esteem of these students. These mini-lessons typically lasted for approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

In the midst of the project, the control group and the experimental group completed a Classroom Climate Survey (Appendix B). The purpose of the administration of this instrument was to establish similarity in the atmosphere of both classrooms. All items were read aloud by the teacher, and discussion for clarification purposes was permitted. The surveys were completed anonymously to encourage honest responses.

After exposure to the selected lessons, the *Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory* was readministered to both groups in order to determine any change in self-perception. As in the pre-test phase of this study, students completed this instrument independently.

### **Description of Instruments**

The *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* (SEI) has been among the best known and most widely used measures of evaluative self-concept (Anastasi, 1988). It was developed in conjunction with an extensive study of self-esteem in children in 1967 by Stanley Coopersmith. The SEI has been designed to assess attitudes toward the self in general, as well as in social, academic, and family contexts.

The school form of the SEI has been used with students from 8 to 15 years of age. It consists of 58 short, favorable or unfavorable statements, and respondents answer by marking each item as "like me" or "unlike me". Eight of the items constitute a lie scale that may indicate defensiveness or an attempt to respond positively to all items; these items are not included in the self-esteem score. For the



other 50 statements, one point is given for each self-esteem item answered correctly, and the raw score is multiplied by 2 for a possible maximum total score of 100. Generally, a score in the upper quartile would be an indicator of high self-esteem, the lower quartile indicating low self-esteem, and the middle range indicative of medium self-esteem. The four subscales may also be scored separately to determine variances in perception of self-esteem in different areas of experiences.

The SEI may be administered to groups or individuals, and can be completed in approximately 10 minutes. During administration, introductory or explanatory remarks should be kept to a minimum, and words like self-esteem, self-concept, or self-evaluation should not be used. This could lead to bias that might invalidate the test. Students begin by completing the information section which includes: name, age, school, gender, grade, and date. Directions are read aloud while students follow along on their inventory booklets. Once all students understand the task, they open their booklets and complete all items independently. Stating the items aloud is permitted for students having difficulty with reading; clarification of word meanings is also allowed.

The SEI has been used with both males and females, all socioeconomic ranges, various ethnic and cultural groups, and many special populations, such as students with learning disabilities. Reliability, stability, and construct validity of this instrument are well supported by research. However, it is highly recommended that the individual interpretation of scores for clinical and educational uses be supplemented with information from behavior observational ratings.

The Classroom Climate Survey is an adaptation of the Learning Environment Inventory which has been used to measure the social climate of classrooms in junior and senior high schools. Each feature on the Learning Environment Inventory has been investigated, and research results have reported which factors have a positive influence on learning outcomes (Walberg & Greenberg, 1997). One statement from each of the 15 environment features of the Learning Environment Inventory was included in this modified version. Other changes that were made included: students described their classroom with yes or no responses instead of using a five-point scale, the order of statements was different, and a few items had been reworded. In an environment with a positive climate, items 4 and 11 would be answered with a no response, and all other statements would elicit a yes answer.

### **Design**

The design of this study was a quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest procedure (Best & Kahn, 1993) that included an experimental group and a control group. The participants were not randomly assigned; grouping depended on the section of the Study Skills class that fit into each student's schedule. This type of design limits the generalizability of the results of the study to populations and environments which are very similar to the two groups involved.

The independent variable was the classroom instruction that focused on increasing the level of self-esteem of members of the experimental group. Lessons concerning goal setting and evaluation, self-awareness, learning styles, compensation

strategies, and study tips, as well as activities designed to understand self-concept, appreciate strengths, and enhance sense of identity and level of self-esteem were conducted during Study Skills class sessions over a 15 week period.

The dependent variable was the self-reported scores obtained from the administration of the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory*; an instrument designed to measure personal evaluation of worthiness as expressed in the attitudes a person has toward the self.

### **Testable Hypotheses**

This study tested the following null hypotheses at the .05 significance level using analysis of covariance.

H<sub>0</sub>-1: High school students with learning disabilities will not achieve a higher score on a self-esteem inventory after participation in regularly scheduled, structured classroom activities designed to improve self-concept than will students who are not exposed to the same treatment.

H<sub>1</sub>-1 : H<sub>0</sub>-1 is false.

H<sub>0</sub>-2: There will be no difference in the self-esteem inventory scores of high school students with learning disabilities after participation in regularly scheduled, structured classroom activities designed to improve self-concept.

H<sub>1</sub>-2: H<sub>0</sub>-2 is false.

## **Analysis of Data**

To determine whether or not to reject the null hypothesis of no statistically significant difference between groups, a comparison of the means of participants' inventory scores was accomplished using analysis of covariance. This technique was chosen to statistically remove the differences that occurred in the pre-tests so that post-test scores could be equally compared. The pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group were also examined for any differences that occurred as a result of the treatment. An analysis of the data is presented in Chapter 4.

## **Summary**

Forty-eight students identified with learning disabilities who attended a high school in southern New Jersey participated in a study designed to determine if self-esteem could be enhanced by participation in classroom activities. Self-esteem scores were obtained by administering the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* to all participants during the pre-test and post-test phases of the study. One-half of the students were assigned to a Study Skills class with the same teacher and served as the control group. The other 24 students were in the experimental group. They also attended a Study Skills class every day, but with a different teacher who conducted lessons aimed at improving their level of self-esteem. All students also completed the Classroom Climate Survey to establish similarity in the atmosphere of both classrooms.

The *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* scores were examined using analysis of

covariance to determine if participation in self-concept enhancing activities resulted in any difference in the scores of the control and experimental groups. Differences in the self-esteem scores of the experimental group prior to and after the treatment were also investigated. The following chapter presents the results of the analyzed data.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Analysis of Results**

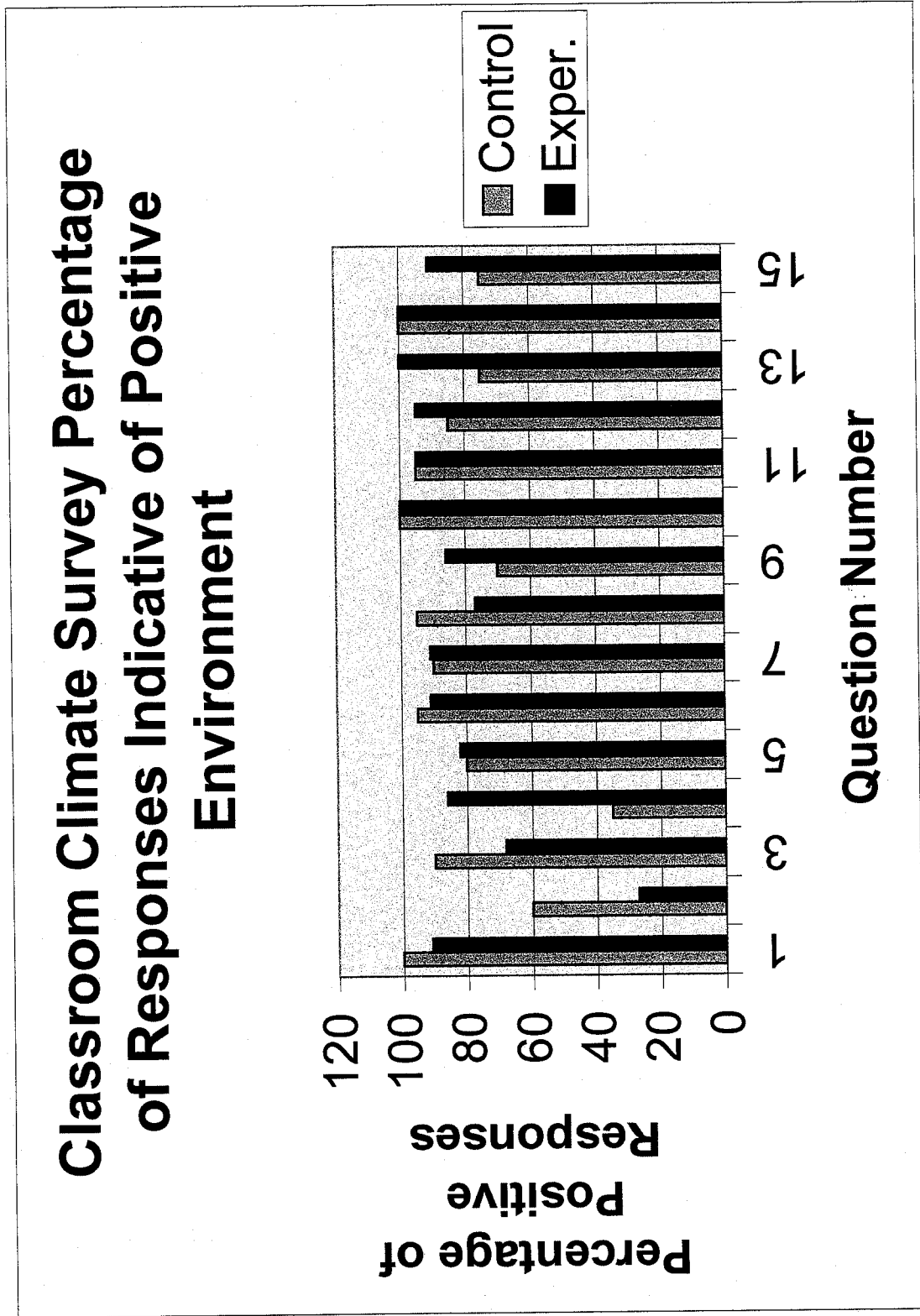
#### **Classroom Climate Survey**

As mentioned in Chapter 3, an adapted version of the Classroom Climate Survey (Appendix B) was administered to students in the control and experimental groups in order to establish similarity of experience in both Study Skills classrooms. Results of this survey are presented in Figure 4.1.

Analysis of the data reveals a high incidence of responses that indicate a positive classroom environment. All students in the control group, and all but one student in the experimental group selected at least ten favorable responses. In addition, twelve or more of the possible fifteen favorable responses were selected by 75% of the control group and 81% of the experimental group.

One of the major discrepancies between the groups was in response to item 2, which related to challenging work. Upon further investigation with the experimental group, students revealed that they didn't perceive tasks in Study Skills class as too difficult to be able to accomplish. Other differences between the groups occurred with responses to items 3 and 4. The control group selected the positive response more frequently in item 3, while the experimental group had a much higher rate of positive response to item 4. However, it should be noted that both of these items refer to

Figure 4.1



social interaction in the classroom, and therefore may indicate more experiential similarity than is apparent..

Based on the analysis of these results, it is concluded that the atmosphere in both Study Skills classes, as well as the experience for students in these classes is similar. However, it is realized that these results must be interpreted cautiously because they do not account for individual differences in the perceptions of the learners.

### **Comparison of Experimental and Control Groups**

The first hypothesis in this study stated that high school students with learning disabilities will not achieve a higher score on a self-esteem inventory after participation in regularly scheduled, structured classroom activities designed to improve self-concept than will students who are not exposed to the same treatment. Analysis of covariance at the .05 significance level yielded no significant difference in the posttest scores of the control group and the posttest scores of the experimental group on the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory*, resulting in failure to reject the null hypothesis.

Table 4.1 shows the consistent substantial variation within the groups across both phases of the testing in this study. The control group scores generated a standard deviation of 16.40 with a range of 56 in the pretest, which increased to a standard deviation of 19.78 and range of 68 in the posttest. The scores of the experimental group resulted in a standard deviation of 13.51 with a range of 54 in the pretest, which increased to a standard deviation of 20.32 and range of 66 in the posttest.



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**Table 4.1**

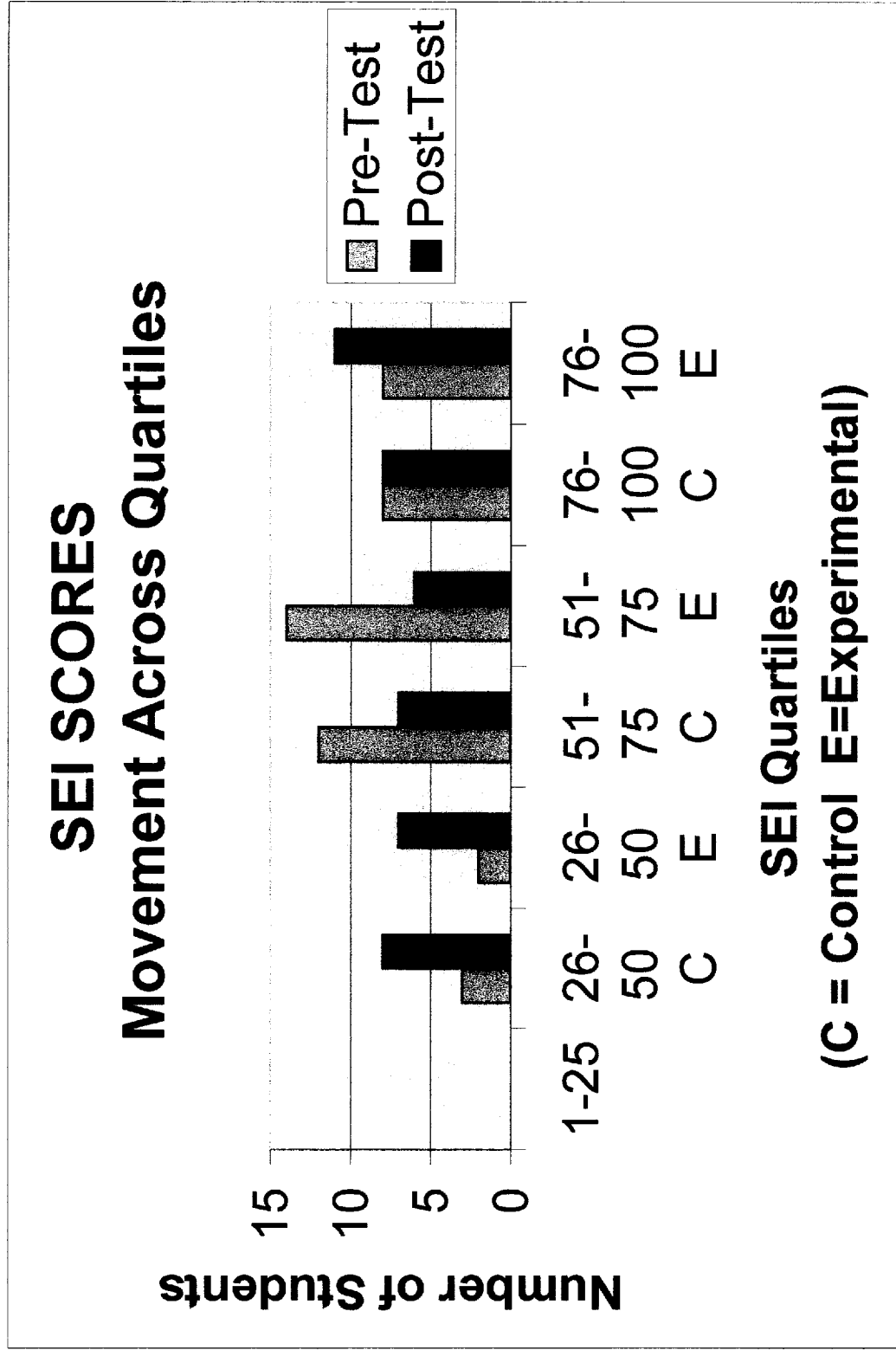
**Mean Levels, Standard Deviations and Ranges of Scores on the  
Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory**

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>	<u>Range</u>
Pretest - Control Group	68.61	16.40	56
Pretest - Experimental Group	69.17	13.51	54
Posttest - Control Group	65.48	19.78	68
Posttest - Experimental Group	65.25	20.32	66

---

One method of interpreting the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* (SEI) scores is by positioning in the group according to quartiles. The upper quartile is generally considered indicative of high self-esteem, a score of 51 to 75 indicates high to medium self-esteem, medium to low self-esteem is indicated by a score of 26 to 50, and the lower quartile is generally indicative of low self-esteem. Figure 4.2 illustrates the movement of pretest and posttest SEI scores across quartiles for the control group and the experimental group. In the control group, fifteen student scores remained in the same quartile, six student scores dropped to a lower quartile, and two student scores moved to a higher quartile. In the experimental group, twelve student scores remained in the same quartile, seven student scores dropped to a lower quartile, and five student scores moved to a higher quartile. Although the majority of student scores remained

Figure 4.2



relatively stable, it should be noted that five students in the control group and six students in the experimental group showed a gain in the posttest score of eight or more points, while nine students in the control group and eight students in the experimental group had a reduction of ten or more points in the posttest. Four scores of students in the study resulted in an extreme variation of thirty points or more between the pretest and the posttest. For two students in the experimental group and one student in the control group, these changes were a substantial decrease in scores; for one member of the control group, the change represented a dramatic increase in score.

The data presented in this study must be interpreted with caution due to the utilization of a self-report instrument, and therefore subject to malingering or faking. In order to determine accuracy of results, the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* (SEI) contains a Lie Scale. The total score for the Lie Scale is obtained by summing the points on the eight items that were incorporated into this instrument as an index of defensiveness. A high score on the Lie Scale (maximum possible score is 8) may invalidate the inventory score. A report of students' responses on the Lie Scale is presented in Table 4.2. As shown in the chart, twelve students in the control group and fourteen students in the experimental group obtained a Lie Scale score of at least three in the pretest. In the posttest, the Lie Scale score was at least three for thirteen students in the control group, but the number of students in the experimental group with a score of three or more decreased to nine.

---

**Table 4.2**

	<u>Number of Students Within each SEI Lie Scale Category</u>								
	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>
<b>Pretest</b>									
Control Group	0	6	5	4	4	4	0	0	0
Experimental Group	4	2	4	6	7	1	0	0	0
<b>Posttest</b>									
Control Group	3	2	5	7	4	0	1	1	0
Experimental Group	1	7	7	3	5	0	0	1	0

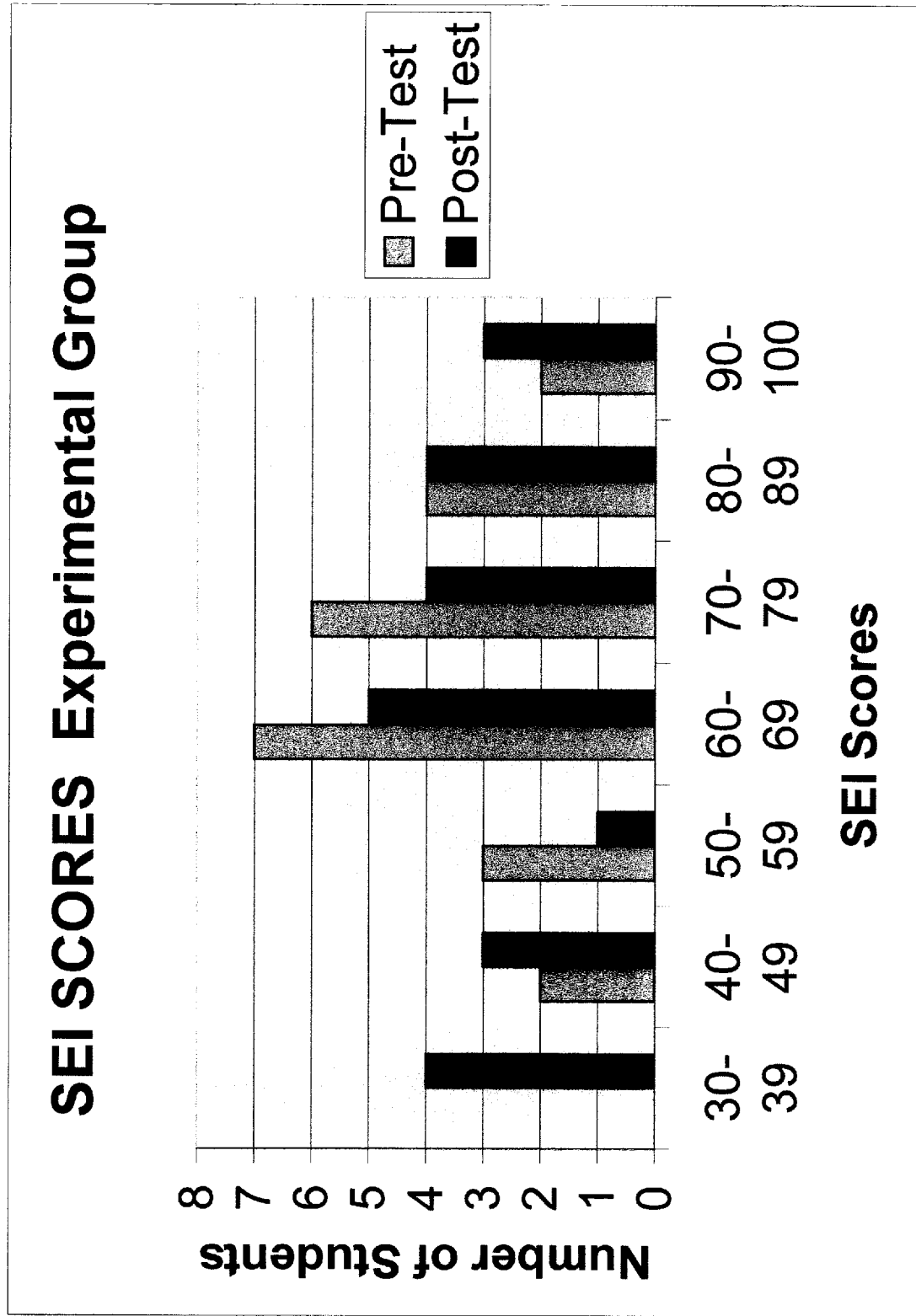
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### **Comparison of Experimental Group Self-Esteem Inventory Scores**

The second hypothesis in this study was that there will be no difference in the self-esteem inventory scores of high school students with learning disabilities after participation in regularly scheduled, structured classroom activities designed to improve self-concept. A *t* test conducted at the .05 significance level yielded no significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores on the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* of the experimental group, resulting in failure to reject the null hypothesis.

An illustration of the total SEI scores on the pretests and posttests for the experimental group is shown in Figure 4.3. In the SEI pretest, the majority of the

Figure 4.3



students scored in the 60s or 70s, but a much wider gap occurred in the posttest scores due to extremes that were not as apparent in the pretest scores. These extremes most likely account for the slight previously mentioned drop in the mean of the posttest scores. Individual differences and variability are further noted by the fact that 12 of the students obtained a higher score in the posttest, while the other 12 students obtained a lower score. The actual changes in individual scores are presented in Table 4.3.

---

**Table 4.3**

**Differences in Experimental Group SEI Posttest Scores and SEI Pretest Scores**

Number of Students Increased Score		Number of Students Decreased Score	
4	+2	1	-2
2	+6	2	-6
1	+8	1	-8
1	+10	3	-10
4	+12	1	-12
		1	-16
		1	-26
		1	-32
		1	-42

---

**Academic Self-Concept**

A growing body of research suggests that the relation between self-concept and behavior can be more clearly demonstrated if self-concept is assessed by a

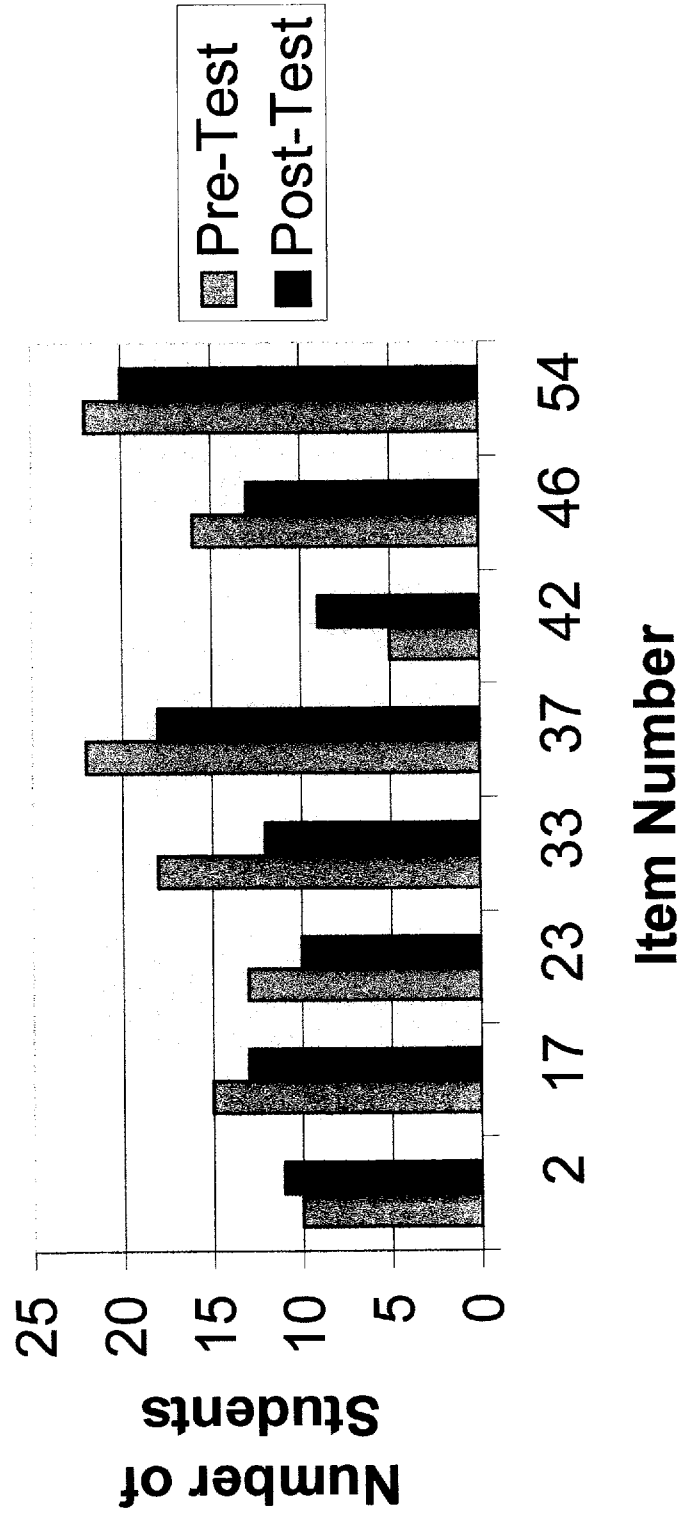
multidimensional instrument. The use of a single, global self-concept score may yield inconsistent results and fail to correlate significantly with other variables, but a more narrowly defined construct, such as academic self-concept, will yield consistent and significant results. Uguroglu and Walberg conducted a meta-analysis of 40 studies of school populations which showed a mean correlation of .29 between general self concept and other cognitive variables including standardized achievement tests, ability tests and grades. Academic self-concept yielded a mean correlation of .41 with the same indices of cognitive achievement (Anastasi, 1988). Investigators have suggested that this discrepancy is especially true for students with learning disabilities, due to the underachievement that is experienced in school situations.

To allow for the investigation of differences in perceptions of self-esteem according to varied experiences, the Coopersmith SEI includes four subscales. Because this study was a school based project, the School-Academic subscale scores have been separated for further analysis. A *t* test conducted at the .05 significance level yielded no significant difference between the School-Academic pretest scores and the School-Academic posttest scores of the experimental group. However, a comparison of the Total Self-Esteem scores and the School-Academic subscale scores yielded a mean correlation of .30 in the pretest scores and resulted in an increased mean correlation of .47 in the posttest scores.

A comparison of the number of experimental group students selecting favorable responses on the pretest and posttest School-Academic subscale items is shown in Figure 4.4. Item 2 refers to difficulty with speaking in front of the class, and resulted

**Figure 4.4**

# **Number of Favorable Responses on School Academic Subscale Items of SEI**





in one additional positive response; item 17 questions feeling upset in school, and yielded two less favorable responses; item 23 addresses feeling discouraged at school, and shows a decrease of three favorable responses; item 33 inquires about being proud of school work, and shows six less favorable responses; item 37 calls for an individual's perception of doing the best work that he/she can, and four less students selected favorable responses; item 42 refers to the desire to be called on in class, and four additional students chose favorable responses; item 46 asks students if they are doing as well as they would like in school, and resulted in three less favorable responses; item 54 examines whether teachers make students feel as if they are not good enough, and yielded two less favorable responses. It should be noted that the two items (2 and 42) receiving the lowest favorable responses posed questions related to speaking in front of peers in a classroom. The majority of students chose the more favorable response in most of the items in both the pretest and posttest phases of this study.

## **Summary**

The Classroom Climate Survey that was administered during the course of this study established similarity of classroom atmosphere and experience for the control group and the experimental group of high school students with learning disabilities. However, there was a great deal of variation in the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* scores of both groups across the pretest and posttest phases of the study.

Following the administration of the pretest, the experimental group participated

in regularly scheduled, structured classroom activities designed to improve self-concept. Analysis of covariance at the .05 significance level yielded no significant difference in the posttest scores of the control group and the posttest scores of the experimental group on the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory*. In addition, a *t* test conducted at the .05 significance level yielded no significant difference between the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group.

The School-Academic subscale scores were also analyzed. A *t* test conducted at the .05 significance level yielded no significant difference between the School-Academic pretest scores and the School-Academic posttest scores of the experimental group. However, a comparison of the Total Self-Esteem scores and the School-Academic subscale scores yielded a mean correlation of .30 in the pretest scores and resulted in an increased mean correlation of .47 in the posttest scores. A discussion of the findings and implications of this study is presented in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5

### Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine if participation in structured, self-concept enhancing classroom activities would improve the self-esteem level of adolescents with learning disabilities. Forty-eight students identified with learning disabilities who were enrolled in a Study Skills class at a high school in southern New Jersey participated in this study. One-half of the students served as the control group; the other 24 students who were instructed by another teacher were in the experimental group. Lessons concerning goal setting and evaluation, self-awareness, learning styles, compensation strategies, and study tips, as well as activities designed to understand self-concept, appreciate strengths, and enhance sense of identity and level of self-esteem were conducted with the experimental group over a period of 15 weeks. Self-esteem scores were obtained by administering the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* to all participants during the pre-test and post-test phases of the study. All students also completed the Classroom Climate Survey to establish similarity in the classroom atmosphere for both groups.

Analysis of the Classroom Climate Survey data revealed a high incidence of responses that indicated a positive classroom environment, and established similarity of

classroom atmosphere and experience for the control group and the experimental group. However, there was a great deal of variation in the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* scores of both groups across the pretest and posttest phases of the study.

Analysis of covariance at the .05 significance level yielded no significant difference in the posttest scores of the control group and the posttest scores of the experimental group on the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory*. In addition, a *t* test conducted at the .05 significance level yielded no significant difference between the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group.

The School-Academic subscale scores were also analyzed. A *t* test conducted at the .05 significance level yielded no significant difference between the School-Academic pretest scores and the School-Academic posttest scores of the experimental group. However, a comparison of the Total Self-Esteem scores and the School-Academic subscale scores yielded a mean correlation of .30 in the pretest scores and resulted in an increased mean correlation of .47 in the posttest scores.

## **Conclusions**

Many researchers have indicated that self-esteem remains rather stable over the adolescent years, but fluctuations can occur due to life events. The results of this study seem to support those statements, for the changes in scores between the pretest and posttest were minimal for most participants in both the control and experimental groups. In addition, further investigation led to the knowledge that students with

substantial decreases in posttest scores were experiencing a great deal of stress in their personal lives.

There are several other factors that could have contributed to the findings in this study. One of the possible elements is the timing of test administration. The pretests were given during the first full week of the school year when students tend to be hopeful about the upcoming academic year, and they had not yet encountered any negative or frustrating experiences. In contrast, the posttests were administered in the middle of the second marking period when students were receiving positive as well as negative information about their progress and achievement in mainstream classes. Students with learning disabilities often become discouraged when faced with academic and social challenges, and as noted by Weist, Wong, and Kreil (1998), this can lead to low expectations of future success, and subsequently low self-worth. Rousseau and Kai Yung Tam (1996) caution against beginning classroom research too near the beginning of the school year. They state that participants need sufficient adaptation time, possibly a few weeks, to adjust to new classroom environments. If the pretests in this study were administered at a later time, perhaps the results would have reflected more realistic views of students' self-evaluations.

Another factor related to time was the brevity of the classroom lessons. Daily activities were usually limited to fifteen minutes because many other tasks had to be completed by the students during each class period. Reports from a number of successful programs that resulted in improved self-esteem scores consisted of sessions that could be more comprehensive because they were conducted in larger blocks of

time, typically two hours each (Bjistra & Jackson, 1998; Bullock, 1993; Crittenden, Kaplan, & Heim, 1984; Tobias & Turner, 1997).

It should also be noted that many of the class activities used in this project were aimed at increasing self knowledge and led to self reflection. The process of personal growth can be painful at times, particularly for adolescents who are searching for a sense of identity. The formation of an identity takes place over several years and is influenced by many factors, including what young people have learned about themselves as individuals. Exposure to some of the ideas presented to participants in this study could initially have led to feelings of discomfort and confusion, and therefore lowered self-esteem. Hopefully, as increased time in Study Skills class is devoted to evaluating personal assets and liabilities, and setting and achieving goals, these students will become more self accepting and will develop an augmented positive view of themselves.

A variable that could not be controlled in this study was the changing composition of the Study Skills classes. The statistical analysis of the data only included information collected from the 48 students who were present throughout the course of the entire study. However, over the 15 week period of time that self-esteem activities were being conducted, a few students moved from the district and several students were added to the class rosters. Changes in class membership altered the group dynamics, and an atmosphere of trust had to be reestablished as additional individuals became part of this project.

One additional concern about this study relates to the testing instrument that

was used. In recent years, there has been growing interest in the multidimensional structure of various self-system components. Investigations have addressed the differentiation between self-esteem and self-concept, and noted the need for accurate assessment of each construct. Self-esteem is the result of a process in which the content of the self-concept is evaluated or judged against personal standards and values. Level of self-esteem may differ significantly from the content of the self-concept, depending on standards employed by the individual in the self-evaluation process. Therefore, a valid measure of self-esteem should include only evaluative aspects of self-perception. The *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* has been criticized for this flaw. Some items on this instrument have a self-evaluative focus, but several items ask for primarily descriptive views that would be more appropriate in the assessment of self-concept (DuBois et al, 1996). Given these content validity issues, it is unclear whether the findings in this study were reflections of students' self-concepts or their levels of self-esteem.

## **Discussion**

Self-concept and self-esteem are among the most frequently examined affective traits of students with learning disabilities, and investigations typically compare youth with learning disabilities with their non-disabled peers. Many of these studies have reported that students with learning disabilities have a lower level of self-esteem than their normally achieving peers (Bingham, 1980; Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998; Hiebert et al, 1982; Knack, 1992).

However, several other research project findings have resulted in no significant difference between the self-concept or self-esteem of students with or without learning disabilities (Epstein-Browell, 1994; McPhail, 1993; Matis, 1984; Sabornie, 1994).

One possible explanation for these discrepancies was addressed in a study that investigated the attributional patterns of high school students with learning disabilities to explain their reported low achievement motivation and lack of self-esteem. The research compared self-reported self-esteem and general attributional patterns of students with learning disabilities and those without disabilities; no significant differences were found between mean scores on either measure. However, students with learning disabilities were also assessed according to an attribution task which consisted of completing an academic assignment, receiving immediate feedback, and explaining their performance. The use of effort attributions to explain academic success or failure was of great interest since previous research has shown that effort attributions are associated with positive self-esteem. Marked differences were noted in the students' responses to the general attribution measure and the task specific attribution measure. Based on these findings, the researcher suggested that adolescents with learning disabilities may have learned to give socially desirable answers on questionnaires that address constructs such as self-esteem (Tollefson, 1982). This conclusion may have implications for this project as evidenced by the fairly high incidence of students' responses on the Lie Scale of the SEI.

An additional explanation for the findings in this project that deserves consideration is the notion of comparison or reference group. All of the students in



this study spend most of their day with normally achieving peers, with only one or two periods a day in the Resource Center. Not only are these individuals continually faced with difficult school work, but they are constantly made aware of the difference between themselves and students without learning disabilities, who serve as their reference group. Raviv and Stone (1991) have suggested that students with severe learning disabilities also have an impaired perception of their condition. They spend much of their school day in special self-contained classes, and therefore have a different comparison group. In contrast to students with mild learning disabilities, their lack of awareness of themselves and how they are perceived by others may help to protect their self-image.

One approach that has been reported to be effective for students with learning disabilities in the regular classroom is the use of mastery learning strategies in inclusion model classrooms. Mastery learning involves a teacher's initial instruction followed by a formative evaluation to provide feedback to the student and the teacher about how well material was learned. Those who have learned the material participate in enrichment activities designed to strengthen and extend their learning. Special individualized corrective activities that involve students in alternative approaches are offered to students who require additional practice. Corrections may be worked on with the regular classroom teacher, with the special education teacher, with peers in cooperative learning teams, or by the students independently. Following the corrective work, a second formative assessment is administered. An evaluation of the effects of the mastery learning program at Thorpe-Gordon School in Jefferson City, Missouri

resulted in a substantial increase in standardized test scores, improved student grades, and students' expressions of feeling more positive about learning and about themselves.

Teachers involved in this program have commented that it has been extremely helpful in meeting students' needs within the regular classroom. Parents have noted improved attitudes and increased self-confidence in their children. Most important, 80% of the students with learning disabilities stated that they preferred the mastery learning/mainstreaming model to other programs in which they had participated (Guskey, Passaro, & Wheeler, 1995).

Student views can be a valuable source of information for educators who are concerned about the psychological, emotional, and social well-being of students. A group of students with learning disabilities who are now successfully attending college shared their insights at CEC's 1999 Annual National Convention. Although divided on many issues, students did agree that the key to their success was accepting the fact that they have a learning disability and that life would be harder for them than for non-disabled individuals. They said it would be advantageous if teachers or counselors assisted students in understanding their disabilities and helped them to develop coping strategies. These students also mentioned that having a learning disability causes extreme damage to self-esteem, and vividly recalled school experiences that reinforced their negative self-concepts. They recommended that teachers maintain high expectations of students, but emphasized the importance of having a "good attitude" toward students with learning disabilities (The truth, 1999).

In addition to concentration on student-teacher relationships, simple efforts to

promote a positive school climate and personalize the school experience can lead to dramatic improvements in the self-esteem of staff as well as students. The staff at Huntington Beach High School in California accomplished this goal by instituting changes that were implemented without any additional financing. Adaptations included adopting block scheduling which allowed for a lower student-teacher ratio, and longer periods of time spent with each student group. A 30 minute tutorial period at the beginning of the day when students could get extra help from teachers was also initiated. Other changes included a student-teacher mentoring program for at-risk adolescents, a school wide anti-violence campaign, awards for students of the month, athletes of the month, and most improved students, and regularly scheduled forums with the vice-principal where students could discuss school policy and activities or voice complaints. These improvements resulted in higher grade point averages, increased test scores, lower suspension rates, and an overall positive attitude about the school environment (Shore, 1995). Whole school reform efforts, such as the one described at Huntington, have a beneficial effect on the total school population, including students with learning disabilities.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The development of a high level of self-esteem is important to the successful development of adolescents. One of the primary challenges of adolescence is preparation to meet adulthood with a comfortable set of self perceptions and aspirations. Feeling positive about one's self is necessary to develop the courage to

take risks and face the challenges of a demanding society. Because it impacts so greatly on the quality of life, research efforts designed to enhance self-esteem should be continued.

In an effort to gain knowledge about how to increase the level of self-esteem in young people, it is essential to assess this construct accurately. The Self-Esteem Questionnaire (SEQ) is a multidimensional measure of self-esteem for adolescents. The content focus of the different dimensions of self-esteem correspond to developmental and ecological influences in the lives of youths. It was developed with consideration of the theoretical differentiation between self-esteem and self-concept, so all items are evaluative in nature. In addition, research results provide support for the reliability and validity of the SEQ (DuBois et al, 1996). Investigators might consider using this promising framework for assessing and conceptualizing evaluations of the self during adolescent development.

One of the major purposes of an accurate measurement device is to determine which strategies and techniques help to raise the self-esteem of some individuals, and maintain a high level of self-esteem in others. Among professionals in the field of psychology, there is general consensus that self-esteem is significantly associated with personal satisfaction and effective functioning. In addition, the causes and consequences of low self-esteem have been well established and reported in the literature. However, the effectiveness of interventions designed to build self-esteem remains speculative and requires additional examination.

Numerous studies on the self-esteem of children and adolescents with learning

disabilities have concentrated on the differences in self-esteem when compared to non-disabled peers. Rather than focusing on these discrepancies, research should be conducted to identify the effects of promising practices. Future studies need to examine the results of support systems, classroom and school climate, social skills and self-advocacy training, mastery learning strategies, goal setting and attainment, self-awareness and reflection activities, instruction in learning strategies and compensation techniques, and other variables that may affect the self-esteem of students with learning disabilities. Ongoing, longitudinal studies are also needed to examine the long term effects of intervention programs and strategies. This positive approach in research efforts could lead to the discovery of elements that should be incorporated into the best practices for enhancing self-esteem. The probability of maximizing potential would be higher for students with learning disabilities, as well as the general population, as a result of this valuable information.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Self-Esteem Building Classroom Activities**

#### **Goal Setting**

- Students were given instruction on criteria for writing goals; personal, present, positive, identifiable, achievable, and measurable.
- For three days, they practiced using the criteria by writing daily goals, and reported on attainment of their personal goals.
- At least one short term goal was identified by each student. An academic goal was required, and an additional personal goal could also be formulated if desired.
- Goals were analyzed by determining the benefits of achievement, development of skills and knowledge required to reach the goals, help from others that might be needed, and obstacles to overcome. The final phase of this analysis consisted of the development of action plans to attain the goals, and the determination of completion dates.
- Individual goals were read every day, and periodically, class time was spent in conference with the teacher to evaluate progress. Modifications of action plans or goal revisions were conducted as needed.
- On the planned date of completion, students assessed whether they successfully achieved their goals, and started the process again with the development of new goals, or maintenance of the original goals.
- In addition to academic goals, students were also required to formulate personal

goals during this second round of goal setting. This was the culminating activity of a lesson based on important qualities and characteristics. Prior to writing these goals, students rated several personal characteristics, selected three that were most important to them, and created a poster based on their selections.

### **Self-Awareness**

Each full week that school was in session, students completed a Personal Style Inventory (PSI) taken from *Psychology for kids* by Jonni Kincher. PSIs are in the form of tests that are designed to be fun, but the purpose of these inventories is for students to learn more about themselves. The theme of this book is that self knowledge leads to personal freedom, and the activities are designed as a process for personal exploration. There are no right or wrong answers, and administration should occur without judgment.

Each PSI has its own instructions and scoring system, but some items were changed slightly by the teacher of the experimental group. Completion of PSI activities took one or two class sessions, depending on how the lesson was expanded. Every topic included a group discussion, and supplemental activities were incorporated into most lessons. Titles of PSIs that were used included:

Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

Are you an introvert or an extrovert?

Do you think in stereotypes?

What sort of morph are you?

What makes you act the way you do?

Are you a leader?

What body language do you speak?

Are you right-brained or left-brained?

What's your learning style?

Are you suggestible?

Communication style 1 (ego states and sensory modes).

Communication style 2 (self-talk and persuasiveness).

### **Learning Styles**

During the course of these lessons, students:

- identified their preferred learning modalities (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile).
- participated in a discussion about the meaning of each learning style.
- read information on effective study tips for each modality.
- selected strategies for personal use, considering primary and secondary learning styles.

### **Direct self-esteem activities**

During these lessons, students:

- wrote 10 positive affirmations and read them everyday.
- circled self-identifying characteristics on a list; classified them according to positive and negative characteristics; determined personal level of self-esteem.
- understood the difference between self-esteem and self-concept.
- determined whether given statements about the self were based on facts or beliefs.



- given scenarios about individuals, decided what was valued, and identified phrases used to indicate value; reflected on personal use of similar statements.
- created lists of items, people, personality characteristics, and preferences that were personally valued.
- identified standards of measurement that could be quantified, and those that did not involve numbers; related to the notion of valuing because of memory, feelings, or personal taste; role played various situations.
- participated in a discussion about the benefits of a positive, optimistic belief system.
- memorized and recited positive message quotes.
- practiced using positive self-talk and self-imaging.

### **Lessons on factors related to self-esteem**

To develop an understanding of the importance of resilience, students:

- participated in a discussion designed to define resilience, realize its importance to success, and identify characteristics of resilient persons.
- generated a list of strategies to increase resilience.
- brainstormed ideas on how to handle bothersome situations and difficult people.
- completed sentence starters that could be reflected upon to help with coping.

To realize the positive effects of self-determination, students:

- participated in discussions concerning the importance of self-determination.
- related this concept to the attainment of individual goals.
- brainstormed ideas to help increase level of determination.

To gain a greater awareness of the concept of self- image, students:

- read and discussed a story about plastic surgery for teens.
- constructed collages to represent themselves; orally presented them to the class; took notes about each classmate; compared similarities and differences; named and stated something learned about each classmate.
- wrote about the positive aspects of their physical selves based on self-selected pictures brought to class.

To develop positive assertiveness, students:

- gained an understanding of three basic behavior styles; nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive.
- identified the behavior style in given statements; constructed their own examples of each type.
- realized that reactions depend on internal dialogue rather than stimulus events.
- identified feelings and self-talk based on given situations.
- became familiar with feeling words to use in assertive communication.
- practiced using "I" messages and factual descriptions to improve assertive communication.
- acted out body language signals, and identified the behavior type associated with each.

## **Appendix B**

### **Classroom Climate Survey**

In this class:

- |  |     |    |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. There is considerable satisfaction with the classwork.                                  | YES | NO |
| 2. Students tend to find the work challenging.   | YES | NO |
| 3. Students know one another very well.  | YES | NO |
| 4. Some students refuse to mix with others.  | YES | NO |
| 5. Class decisions tend to be made by all the students.                                    | YES | NO |
| 6. The class knows exactly what it has to get done.  | YES | NO |
| 7. Students seldom compete with one another.   | YES | NO |
| 8. The class is rather informal and few rules are imposed.                                 | YES | NO |
| 9. Students do not have to hurry to finish their work.                                     | YES | NO |
| 10. Students have many different interests.  | YES | NO |
| 11. There is tension and quarreling among students.  | YES | NO |
| 12. Every student enjoys the same privileges.  | YES | NO |
| 13. The class is well organized and efficient.   | YES | NO |
| 14. Students can easily get the books and equipment<br>they need or want in the classroom. | YES | NO |
| 15. Members of the class care what the class does.   | YES | NO |

Adapted from the Learning Environment Inventory (Fraser et al, 1991).