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The Effects of Community Service on Middle School Students’ Self-Esteem

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Honors Project

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Introduction

“Success is liking yourself, liking what you do, and liking how you do it.” This quote by Maya Angelou describes my philosophy on life. It is my belief that one cannot be truly successful without first believing and respecting one’s self. No matter what the definition of success may be, whether it means earning a degree and finding a career or staying out of debt your entire life, I think true success comes from being happy. To be happy, you must first be happy with yourself.

I am happy with who I am today. I know I am not the same girl that moved into Harshman-Dunbar three years ago and I know I’ve grown into a happier, more successful person because of the experiences I’ve had here at Bowling Green State University. Two experiences I believe have greatly affected my success while here at BGSU have been being a part of Dance Marathon and being a student in the College of Education and Human Development.

As a leader within the organization Dance Marathon I have learned about the positive effects that come from giving back to others. Dance Marathon is a philanthropy that supports Mercy Children’s Hospital in Toledo, Ohio. Through Dance Marathon I have had the opportunity to work directly with families that have spent time as patients at Mercy and hear their stories. I truly believe my experiences with Dance Marathon have not only taught me many leadership qualities, but have also made me a better person. I feel connected to my university, the community, and my peers that are involved in Dance Marathon. I have also become more confident and am genuinely happier in my day-to-day routine. Overall, having the opportunity to give back through Dance Marathon has given me a “feel-good feeling” that has improved my self-concept and made me a happier person.
My experience as a student of the College of Education and Human Development has also positively affected my self-concept. There is no better feeling than that of having someone support and encourage you; having a mentor who praises you and guides you as you grow into an independent individual. This is the impact professors have left on me, an impact I hope to leave on students of my own one-day. Thinking of this possibility, the possibility of changing students’ lives for the better, has empowered me and driven me within my studies and beyond. This possibility has made me a happier person who is successful within her endeavors.

For my Honor’s Project I decided to combine these two passions of education and service together to help others be successful. In my ideal world, every student would have all the opportunities available to them that I have had while here at BGSU so that they can grow as learners, leaders, and givers. In my vision all middle school students would be given support and guidance that will lead them to being more confident in themselves as well as help them develop a passion for service. Simply stated, I want my students to be happy and successful, something I believe comes from having self-respect. I believe this can be built through community-based service projects. Therefore I will be researching the effects of community-based service organizations on middle school students’ self-esteem in hopes of one day putting into practice a community-based service organization at the school in which I teach.

**Self-Esteem**

Self-respect has always been an interesting concept to me. It’s something that is so significant, yet it has no defined characterization. It is a perception unique to each human being, yet it can be so difficult to find. Even when it is found, it can still be easily and quickly
lost. Self-respect can change a person in many ways and the lack of it can be the cause of many destructive habits and actions. As Maureen A. Manning described in “Self-Concept and Self-Esteem in Adolescents,” the concept is often thought of to the extreme; “Low self-esteem is viewed as the cause of all evil and high self esteem as the cause of all good,” (11). I’ll admit this is what my understanding of self-concept was, too. I have always believed if you have high self-esteem you also have a great, happy life and if you have low self-esteem you are unhappy therefore you cause problems.

While my perception of self-esteem may have been a little extreme, I was correct in my belief that it is something middle school students struggle with. According to the website “Heart of Leadership,” girls’ self-esteem peaks when they are 9 years old. The website also shares the statistic, “7 in 10 girls believe they are not good enough or do not measure up in some way including their looks, performance in school, and relationships.” More than half of the female population feels unhappy with themselves! Reading these alarming statistics makes me even more determined to be a positive influence on my future students’ lives. Through my research I’m hoping to find a way to improve students’ self-concept.

Mistaking the terms “self-concept,” “self-esteem,” and “self-efficacy,” as interchangeable terms is another common misperception that I was guilty of before my research. Colleen Willoughby, Gillian King, and Helene Polatajko explain the different meanings of each of these terms in their article, “A Therapist’s Guide to Children’s Self-Esteem.” The group breaks it down into three main terms: global self-esteem, self-concept, and perceived self-efficacy. “Global self-esteem is the overall value that one places on oneself as a person and the generalized feeling of worthiness one holds,” (qtd. In
Willoughby, King, and Polatajko (125). The term “global” is given to suggest a general measurement where as the term “self-esteem” can be used interchangeably with a more specific meaning. The description “self-concept” is given by oneself to describe beliefs, ideas, and attitudes about oneself. The article quoted Rosenberg who described self-concept as “a body of knowledge that persons possess about themselves. Self concept, therefore, refers to how one describes oneself, whereas self-esteem refers to an overall evaluation of oneself,” (125). Finally the article defined the third term, “perceived self-efficacy,” as one’s estimation of how well one can execute the actions necessary to deal with life events. Perceived self-efficacy is said to vary depending on the activity in question (125). The three terms’ meanings differ based off the subject or skill being measured. Put simply by Rosenberg, self-esteem is the overall positive or negative orientation toward oneself that is only one component of the self-concept, or the totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings with reference to himself as the object. Therefore self-efficacy is another component or self-concept that can be thought of as mastery of a certain skill (qtd. in University of Maryland website).

After clarifying the meaning of these separate terms, I found I was looking for a way to measure the self-esteem of my students, or a way to document their evaluations of themselves. Fortunately there are multiple surveys or scales already created specifically for measuring adolescents’ self-esteem. The first survey I found and used within my project is known as The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is described as one of the most widely used self-esteem measures in social science research. The scale was developed by Dr. Rosenberg who was a professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland from 1975 until his death in 1992. According to the University of Maryland’s
website, Dr. Rosenberg’s work examined how social structural positions and institutional contexts like schools or families relate to self-esteem. He believed there to be at least four key theoretical principles that underlie the process of self-concept formation: reflected appraisals, social comparisons, self-attributions, and psychological centrality. Reflected appraisals refers to how we think others regard us, social comparisons refers to us comparing ourselves to others, self-attributions refers to the way we interpret our behavior, and psychological centrality refers to the feeling of being socially recognized in regards to our social class, status, race, religion, or organizational affiliations (Mecca, Smeiser, & Vasconcellos, 38).

Although Rosenberg believed there to be four key principles that underlie the process of self-concept formation, his scale was not created to assess all facets of self-worth. While having more detailed results would be useful, I also didn’t want to have a scale too complex for the young students I would be working with. The simplicity and short length of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is why I chose to use this scale for the third and fourth grade students I surveyed.

However, to collect more domain-specific elements of self-esteem I utilized another scale, The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI), for the fifth grade students I worked with. The CSEI is a personal assessment of one’s self-worth often manifested in personal attitudes and expressions concerning himself or herself (www.wisegeek.com). The inventory has five subscales: general self, social self peers, home parents, lie scale, and school academic. The lie scale that is built in is to help identify when students are “presenting a rosier picture than the reality being experienced,” (C12). Although community service is not a direct subscale that is given, I believe community service, such
as that completed by the students I worked with, will positively effect students’ general and school academic scales.

**Project Explanation**

For my project I had students involved in a community-service based organization complete a pre and post survey to identify their sense of self-esteem before and after their experiences providing services for others. The group I worked with was at the school I am currently student teaching at, McComb Elementary School. The student group is known as K-Kids.

K-Kids is a student-led service organization for elementary school students in grades 3-5. The Findlay Noon Kiwanis Club is the K-Kids club sponsor for McComb Local School’s K-Kids. The stated objectives of K-Kids are as follows:

- To provide opportunities for working together in service to school and community
- To develop leadership potential
- To foster development of a strong moral character
- To encourage loyalty to school, community, and nation

I received permission from the K-Kids Club advisor who is the elementary school guidance counselor, as well as the school principal, to work with this group of students throughout the year. For my project I sent an introductory letter home to the students' parents asking permission to work with their students for this project. Although there are approximately 80 students involved with the organization I will only be including data in my report from students whose parents granted permission for their student to be involved.
After being given permission, I then performed a self-esteem assessment on the students before the kickoff of K-Kids for the school year. This assessment gave me data about the students’ self-esteem levels prior to participating in the service organization. I used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale for the third and fourth grade students and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory for the fifth grade students. Directions were given to each group of students. The fifth grade students then completed the form individually where as the third and fourth grade students had each of the ten statements read aloud to them. Students were able to ask questions about any statements they did not understand.

After students completed the pre-survey they began the yearly community service projects that K-Kids are involved with. Each student is required to participate in 2 activities to be able to attend the end of the year celebration. The community service the students could volunteer for over the year involved a variety of activities. From collecting cans for a food drive to putting on the Veteran’s Day assembly, the students had many opportunities to volunteer their services.

One service activity I planned for the K-Kids was at the McComb Food Pantry. Many of the students come from low socio-economic homes that not only visit the food pantry but also cannot provide after school transportation. Therefore I planned the service activity to happen during the school day, specifically during their lunchtime. Each grade level had their own date that they could walk to the food pantry with the advisor and I where they would then learn about how the pantry works, pack boxes for donations, and pack bags of food for the McComb school food support system. I believe this service activity helped the students reflect on the positive effects of helping others as well as the
importance of supporting their community. Overall, I think the students involved with K-Kids had a great opportunity to give back to their community and others in need.

After the final food pantry trip the students then completed the same surveys they completed as pre-tests (Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale) as a form of post-assessment. The third and fourth grade students had their scale read to them as in the pre-test and the fifth grade students worked individually. These results were then collected and compared to the pre-survey results as a means of showing the effects of the community service the students had completed throughout the year.

Results

To score the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale students can earn up to 3 points per statement using the Likert scale, making a possible total of 30 points. The scale reverses in valence to prevent the students from rigging their total scores. As given by Rosenberg, the normal range is between 15 and 25; scores below 15 suggest low self-esteem.

While there weren’t any apparent patterns within the third grade results, overall
47% of those tested had an increase in their overall total on the self-esteem scale. In the pre-test there was one student who scored below the “normal range” according to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. In the post-test there were no students with a total less than the normal range of 15-25. 20% of the students surveyed had a total that remained the same from pre-test to post-test and 33% had a total that decreased.

The fourth grade results were similar to that of the third grade but with greater percent of the total having an increased score in the post-test. There were 16 total students that participated from the fourth grade. These 16 students also used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale with the highest score possible of 30. Of the 16 students, 11 students had an increased total from the pre to the posttest. Three students’ scores remained the same and 2 students’ scores decreased. In the pre-test 7 students scored below the norm, suggesting low self-esteem. In the posttest only 3 students scored below the norm. Overall, 69% of the students showed an increase in self-esteem in their posttests.
The fifth grade students were given the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. This inventory is made up of 58 statements that students select as “Like Me,” or “Unlike Me.” Those overall statements are then broken into five subscales, which cycle the length of the self-esteem inventory. The subscales are general self, social self-peers, home parents, lie scale, and school academic. These subscales do not have to be scored separately with the exception of the lie scale. The lie scale gives the number of responses indicative of defensive, lying reactions from students. Students with scores of 5-8 on the lie scale may not be filling out the survey accurately; instead students are presenting a rosier picture than the reality being experienced. To find the students’ overall scores the general self, social self peers, home parents, and school academic items are added together and multiplied by two so that the maximum score is 100. As reported by Coopersmith, the average score for boys ages 10-12 years is 70.1 and girls 72.2.

Of the 17 fifth-grade students given permission to participate in my project, 3 students’ results showed their responses weren’t reliable because of their high scores on
the lie scale. Of the remaining 14 students, 10 students were girls and 4 were boys. 7 of the 10 girls were above average in their posttest results and 3 of the 4 boys were above the male average in their posttest results. This was positive news because the pre-test results showed 50% of the students surveyed were below average. The posttest showed only 29% were below average. Overall, 79% of the students’ overall scores increased from the pre-test to the posttest.

As mentioned before, the Coopersmith Inventory has multiple subscales. I had predicted the students’ general and academic scale would increase as a result of their participation in the community service the group K-Kids took part in. While the academic scale did not show any patterns, all but two students’ general-self scale increased. The students’ social scale scores also increased or stayed the same with no student’s scores decreasing in this specific subscale.

**Conclusion**

What does all of this mean? What did I learn from the results of the self-esteem inventories and scales? While there is no evident pattern that connects the K-Kids’ experience with their increase in self-esteem, I still believe a more detailed study could prove this connection. I hope to eventually implement this detailed study to continue researching the effects of community service on middle school students’ self-esteem. This study would have several changes to it now that I’ve been able to reflect on the study I completed with the K-Kids at McComb Elementary School.

The first change I would make would be to use technology when surveying my students. Using laptops or iPads as means of distributing the surveys would have not only made calculating the results quicker and easier, but also would have open doors to other
possibilities. For example, I could pre-record each statement from the surveys for the students as well as an explanation of what it meant so that students would have the opportunity to hear the statements read as many times as needed. I think some of the younger students didn’t fully understand all of the statements and therefore just marked an answer.

Having the surveys done electronically could have also allowed me to time each student’s responses. Some students flew through the surveys at such a speed it was obvious they hadn’t read all the statements or taken time to think about their responses. If the students knew I was timing them they might have more incentive to take their time. Overall, while technology might not have been a great tool for the students I surveyed at McComb due to their lack of experience with laptops and iPads, using technology in a future study could greatly benefit my research.

Another change I would make to this research involves the subscales of The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. The information from the 5 subscales left me with more questions than I had going into the study. I wondered if the variety of questions was too much and they should have been more specified. I also wondered a subscale had ever been made to record self-esteem in relation to service or giving back to others. While I appreciate the different subscales because they are all related to self-esteem, I think making a survey focused on one subscale would be more beneficial. Many of my students were getting restless when completing the survey, something I’m sure affected their results. Having a shorter survey with a scale specific to one subject such as community service could be a great way to test my theory again.
A third improvement I would like to make if I were to continue with this research would be to choose more visible service activities. What I mean by this is that because the students are so young they sometimes have trouble making connections from things done at school to the real world. This lack of vision may prevent them from experiencing the true feeling of giving back purely because they cannot see how their actions are positively affecting others. By having activities where the students work directly with those they’re helping, such as in a nursing home or children’s hospital, I believe the students are more likely to benefit from the community service in a way that positively effects their self-esteem.

The final change I would make to my project would be to lead more reflective discussions after each service activity. Some of the students were able to do this quickly at the food pantry, but not all of the K-Kids were a part of the discussion. I believe talking about what the students are doing and reflecting on how it benefits others helps students better understand their positive effect on others and the community.

**Reflection**

Reflecting on my past four years at Bowling Green State University, I believe I’ve had a successful career as an undergraduate student. I’ve been able to get involved on campus, meet new students, grow as a young professional and leader, and grow as an individual. I know that I am blessed to have been a part of this university and the many opportunities it offers. It’s because of Bowling Green State University and the organizations I’ve been a part of over the past 4 years that has led me to the happy, successful person I am today. It is my dream that I will be able to provide similar experiences to my future students and it is a dream I plan to continue to work hard to achieve.
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