

# **The Self-esteem of pupils in SEBD schools, myth and reality**

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## Abstract

The self-esteem of pupils has long been regarded as a key variable affecting both pupil's learning and behaviour. As Emler (2003) has recently pointed out this link may not be as strong as many in education have always assumed.

The purpose of this study was twofold. First an examination was made of 35 statements written by officers at seven different education authorities in the North-west of England and forwarded to one of two schools who specialise in working with pupils with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties (SEBD). It was found that of the 35 statements examined, 34 included self-esteem as one area of the special need. However further examination of the advices in those statements found evidence that only one professional had assessed the pupil's self-esteem as part of the assessment procedure.

The second part of the study examined the self-esteem of 60 pupils in four special SEBD schools. Each pupil was assessed using the B/G-Steem Self-esteem Scale, Mains and Robinson (1988). The results showed that the average scores for self-esteem for both the primary and secondary sample were very similar to the scores obtained by Mains and Robinson (1988) in their original sample of pupils in mainstream schools. However it was apparent that more pupils than expected appeared to have either a very low or a very high self-esteem. In terms of Locus of Control it was found that a large number of secondary pupils had a high score on this scale. However this was not found to be the case for the primary pupils in the sample.

These results are discussed and the implications for teachers, educational psychologists and education officers are presented.

## Introduction

Self-esteem is often assumed to be an important variable in determining educational success. As a result a great deal of effort has been directed to help pupils improve their self-esteem. The research evidence on which this assumption has been based is often thin; this is especially the case when considering the relationship between self-esteem and pupils behaviour. The purpose of this paper is two fold. First it will examine the degree to which low self-esteem is assumed to be an important special need of pupils with social, emotional and behaviour problems. It will do this by examining the statements of 35 pupils who are attending one of two independent special schools for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Second it will examine the self-esteem of 60 pupils attending one of four special schools whose pupils have statements indicating they have social, emotional and behavioural needs to find out if in fact they do have especially low self-esteem.

Self-esteem as a theory is as old as psychology. As a concept it first appeared in 'Principals of Psychology', by William James (1890). He defined self-esteem as success divided by pretensions. This basic concept of self-esteem being a comparison between ideal self and actual self has persisted in most subsequent definitions. Modern psychologists who have attempted to measure self-esteem have refined their definitions. Coopersmith (1967) designed a 50 item inventory, designed for use with preadolescents emphasises evaluation rather than feeling, the Piers-Harris scale (Piers, 1969) is a similar inventory, much used in research. Rosenberg (1965) developed a simple 10 question scale that emphasises feelings. Rosenberg's scales could be described as measuring a global self-esteem, while Coopersmith's scale included questions about four areas of child's lives, parents, peers school and personal interests. This scale is similar to one devised in England by Mains and Robinson

(1988) which contained questions on family, academic, physical, and social areas of a child's life as well as questions on locus of control.

Within education self-esteem is often seen as an important variable affecting a pupil's progress. One hypothesis is that educational failure damages a young person's self-esteem. An alternative hypothesis is that pupils with poor self-esteem fail to learn in part because their self-esteem is already low. This second hypothesis was behind the work of Lawrence (1973) who found that by counselling junior pupils he helped to improve their reading skills. A similar approach was recently adopted by Galbraith and Alexander (2005). Burton (2004) reported group sessions in a secondary school to help dyslexic students.

Research over many years, using a variety of scales and measures of self-esteem, has shown a very consistent pattern, self-esteem and educational attainment are related but the links are not strong. Lawrence (1981) found a 'small but significant' correlation of 0.325. In individual studies the correlations can be as high as 0.5, West et al (1980). On average the correlations are much lower. A review by Hansford and Hattie (1982) found average correlations of 0.16 and West et al (1980) in a review of 300 studies put the estimate at 0.18. Longitudinal studies allow the opportunity to examine the influence low self-esteem may have on educational outcome. Feinstein (2000) analysed data from the British Cohort study of over 8,500 subjects. Measured self-esteem at age 10, was found only to be 'trivially' related to later educational attainments. Recently Flouri (2006) was able to conclude, (page 42),

*'empirical support for a causal relationship between self-esteem and school achievement is often weak and confounded, (Midgett, Ryan, Adams and Cornville-Smith (2002); Ross and Broh (2000)).'*

The relationship between self-esteem and pupil's behaviour in school appear far from simple. Essentially three different hypotheses have been put forward.

- 1) Low self-esteem is related to antisocial behaviour; Ferguson and Harwood (2002) suggested that low self-esteem was related to potential offending behaviour and Donellan et al (2005) found a relationship between low self esteem and self-reported delinquent behaviour in teenage young people.
- 2) Self-esteem is not related to behaviour. This hypothesis is supported by McCarthy and Hoge (1984) in a study of over 2000 adolescents and more recently by Jang and Thornberry (1998).
- 3) High self-esteem is related to anti-social behaviour. Kernis et al (1989), who found that adults with high but unstable self-esteem were more likely to display angry and hostile behaviour than others. This view is also supported by the work of Baumeister, Baumeister, Smart and Boden (1996) and Baumeister Campbell, Kruger and Vohs (2003) who found high self-esteem in adolescents was related to anti-social behaviour.

The variation in these research findings may have a number of sources. Firstly it is rare for almost any two different authors to use the same device for measuring self-esteem and certainly there is wide variation in the methods used to measure behaviour; Donellan et al (2005) use a self-report for measuring delinquent behaviour while others, Jang and Thornberry (1998) used teacher reports. The accuracy of these devices i.e. the extent to which these reports of behaviour compare with actual behaviour is rarely examined.

In a major review of self esteem studies Emler (2001) formed the view that the design of a most published research meant that it was unable to show whether self-esteem had a causal influence on behaviour patterns. He pointed out that this was only possible from longitudinal studies that followed individuals over a period of time, such as the Feinstein (2000) study or that of McCarty and Hoge (1984). However from the best research available he was able to conclude;

- i) Relatively low self-esteem appeared **not** to be a risk factor for delinquency, violence towards others (including child and partner abuse), and drug use, alcohol abuse, educational under attainment or racism.
- ii) Relatively low self-esteem **did** appear to be a risk factor for suicide, suicide attempts, depression, victimisation by others and teenage pregnancy.

He concluded that low self-esteem in an absolute sense was in fact rare and was probably one outcome of an individual's poor relationship with their parents during early development. He suggested that parenting style appeared to be an important factor in the development of self-esteem. He also pointed out that planned interventions could be effective in raising self-esteem. However little was known about why they worked, if they were effective in the long term or if changes in self-esteem lead to changes in behaviour.

Emler's work seems to question the assumption that an individual's low self-esteem is related to many of the types of behaviour i.e. delinquency, violence towards others, and educational under achievement that are often referred to in the statements of pupils who are described as displaying Social, Emotional and Behavioural

Difficulties (SEBD). Therefore it useful to ascertain the extent to which low self-esteem is regarded by education authorities as an issue for those pupils it recommends attend specialist school for pupils assessed as having social, emotional or behaviour difficulties. It would also seem valuable to assess the self-esteem of pupil's attending specialist schools for pupil's deemed to have social, emotional or behavioural difficulties to see if indeed they have especially low self-esteem,

The purpose of this paper is two fold. Part 1 will establish the extent to which self esteem is seen by education authorities as an important part of the special needs of pupils to whom they have given a statement on grounds of their behaviour .This will be done by carrying out a survey of statements of pupils attending one of two independent special schools. Part 2 will attempt to assess the self esteem of 60 pupils attending one of four special schools. It will therefore be possible to establish the degree to which problems with self esteem are indeed an issue for pupils assessed as having social, emotional or behavioural difficulties.

## Part 1

### Method

A survey was carried of the Statement of Special Educational Needs of 35 pupils whose statements were sent to two independent special schools. Each statement was read in detail. Special attention was paid to section 2 of the document; this includes a description of the child's needs, and section 3 which outlines the type of specialist educational resources the child would expect to receive. A note was made if

in either section any mention was made of self esteem. Careful attention was paid to the advices given to the education authorities by educational psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and any other agency to see if at any time an assessment had been made by a professional to measure the pupils' self esteem using a standardised assessment procedure or if any of these professionals had mentioned self-esteem as an issue in any part of their assessment report.

The statements of 35 students attending one of two independent special schools were examined in this way. The statements were from seven different local authorities all of which were from the North-West of England.

## Results

The main results are presented in Table 1

**Table 1      The number of statements that include self esteem as part of a pupil's special educational need and the number pupils who self esteem has been assessed during formal assessment. (n=35)**

Number of Statements examined	Number of Statements that included self esteem as part of pupil's needs	Number of that did not include self esteem as part of pupil's needs	Number of statements that included an appendix with an assessment of pupil's self esteem
35	34	1	1

These results would appear to suggest that self esteem is seen as an important element of the special needs of pupil's assessed as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties by education authorities who write the statements. However their written statements do not appear to be based on the assessments carried out on their behalf by educational psychologists and others. In only case was evidence found in any of the written advices indicating either that any assessment of self-esteem had been carried out or that in the view of the professional that self-esteem was an important element in the young person's development.

## Part 2

### Method

The self esteem of 60 pupils in four different EBD schools was assessed using the B/G Steem self-esteem scale (Mains and Robinson, 1990). This assessment tool was used as it is relatively easy to administer and has been standardised on a British school population and trialed in British special schools. In addition the scale includes a measure of Locus of Control. This concept was developed by Rotter (1958). The theory of Locus of Control suggests that pupils differ in the extent to which they believe their own behaviour leads to the outcomes they subsequently experience. Those described as 'internals' perceive strong causal relationships. An 'external' on the other hand perceives a weak causal relationship and therefore regards any outcome of their behaviour to be more influenced by chance or factors

outside their control. Research by Gilmore (1978) and Connolly (1980) suggests that children they class as ‘mal-adaptive, unmotivated and unco-operative’ are more likely to be ‘externals’. In schools with pupils described as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties we would therefore expect a higher proportion of ‘externals’ in our sample.

The assessment was made during an individual interview with each pupil and carried out by either an assistant educational psychologist or an educational psychologist. Permission to interview the pupils was sought from all the parents concerned.

The pupils attended either one of two day SEBD schools maintained by a local authority, a residential SEBD school maintained by a local authority or an independent junior day SEBD school. The pupils were from both key stage 2 and 3. Thirty pupils were at Key stage 2 and thirty at key stage 3. Although all three of the day schools who took part in the survey took both boys and girls pupils very few girls were actually attending any of the schools. The assessments reported in this survey were only carried out on boys.

## Results

The results of the assessments are presented in Table 2

**Table 2      The measured self esteem of Junior and Secondary Pupils in SEBD schools in comparison with the Mains and Robinson (1990) sample**

Pupil	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mains and Robinson Mean
Key Stage 2 (Junior)	16.13	2.73	15.79
Key Stage 3 (Secondary)	20.00	4.37	20.74

The average scores obtained from the sample of pupil's in the specialist SEBD schools was very similar indeed to those scores found by Mains and Robinson (1988) in their original standardisation sample taken from a mainstream schools. Thus the results demonstrate that in terms of average scores the measure self esteem of the pupils in the four SEBD schools was similar to the measured self esteem of pupils in mainstream schools.

The B/G-Steem also provides a table that allows the scores of self-esteem to be categorised as being very low, low, normal, high and very high. The scores of the pupils in the sample were therefore examined to see the distribution of the pupil's scores. This would allow us to examine the extent to which pupils with especially high or low self esteem were a feature of this special school sample. These results are presented in Table 3

**Table 3      The number and percentage of pupils categorised as having Very Low, Low, Normal High or Very High Self-esteem (n = 60)**

Self Esteem	Sample
Very Low	10 (16%)
Low	8 (13%)
Average	23 (38%)
High	7 (12%)
Very High	12 (20%)

The distribution of these scores shows that the self-esteem of the majority pupils in the sample, 63%, was in the normal range. There did appear to be a larger than expected number of pupils whose scores fell in the extremes of the scale, i.e. either having an extremely low or very high self-esteem.

In terms of those pupils with markedly low scores, 16%, it was noted that half these pupils that fell into this category came from the residential school. Of equal note a larger than expected number of pupils, 20%, scored in the extremely high range on the scale. Those who scored in this range came from all schools in the sample, five were primary pupils and seven came from one of the secondary schools. These scores are presented graphically in Figure 1

*(Insert Figure 1 around here)*

The scores of each of the pupils in terms of their measured Locus of Control were collated. The results are presented in table 4.

**Table 4**

**The mean score, standard deviation and scores of pupils on the Locus of Control scale**

	Mean score	Standard Deviation	Internal	Normal	External
Primary n = 30	4.49	0.973	8	21	1
Secondary n= 30	5.67	1.304	7	13	10

These results show that as far as the average score is concerned the pupils in our sample scored in a very similar fashion to those in Mains and Robinson's (1988) mainstream sample, primary, mean score = 4.74 and secondary, mean score = 5.67. However it is noticeable that there would appear to be a marked difference in the pattern of the scores. In our primary sample only one pupil scored in the 'external' range of scores, whereas ten pupils in the secondary sample were found to be in that range. According the hypothesis put forward by Hartley (1986) we would expect a disproportionate representation of pupils from SEBD schools to be found in the 'external' category. While this would appear to be the case for the secondary pupils in this study, it was not the case for the primary pupils.

## Discussion

A number of issues are raised by the results of this study. The first series are concerned with the role of local authorities particularly in regard to their role in the writing of statements.

It would appear that the statements reviewed in this study, with only one exception, included as one of the pupil's needs, the need to enhance the pupil's self

esteem. This stated pupil need, with one exception, did not appear to be based on any assessment of the young person's measured self esteem, which would normally be contained in one of the advices from which that statement had been generated. The fact that any reference to self-esteem appears in the formal Statement at all would therefore appear to be based on the writers' assumptions rather than proven evidence. The fact that, with one exception, educational psychologist, psychiatrists and others did not attempt to carry out any formal assessment of self esteem may indicate that they do not feel it is an important element of the special needs of the pupils they assessed.

In almost all the statements reviewed in the survey, as far as the pupil's self esteem is concerned, the final statement did not appear to be based on a careful reading of the advices. Many statements appeared to be remarkably similar, identical sentences and paragraphs were common and therefore the impression was left that they had been constructed from a list of convenient paragraphs from the memory bank of a word processor rather than a detail examination of the advices provided. This tended to support the view of a number of schools and teachers that statements do not always reflect the needs of children and are written more as a device for school placement. It would appear that the writers of statements have made the false assumption that all pupils destined for a SEBD school have a low self esteem. The second part of this study found that this is not necessarily so.

The second series of issues in this study are concerned with the self esteem of the pupils in SEBD schools. Two findings seemed to emerge. First in terms of the mean value of measured self esteem, see table 2, there would appear to be little difference in the average measure of self esteem between the special school sample and that from mainstream school as measured by Mains and Robinson (1999) in their

original standardisation of the scale. In respect of their overall self esteem therefore pupils placed in SEBD schools are very similar to their counterparts in mainstream schools.

The second finding of the survey that needs further comment is the proportion of pupils with very low or very high self-esteem, see Table 3 and Figure 1. There were a proportion of pupils 16% of the sample with particularly low self-esteem. This is more than would have been predicted in terms of natural distribution. This larger than expected number may be explained by our inclusion of pupils from a residential school. Detail examination of the pupils in this group showed that of the 10 pupils in that group 5 came from the residential school. Placement in a residential school is rare and often only takes place as a consequence of family breakdown or where an exceptional dysfunctional family is concerned. Emler (2003) noted that especially difficult family relationships and adverse life experiences could result in low self-esteem. This therefore might explain the presence of a higher than expected number of pupils in this group.

There was a larger than expected number of pupils with especially high self-esteem, 20 % of the sample. This has been noted before amongst young people with difficult or challenging behaviour, see Baumeister et al (1996) and (2003). Baumeister seem to suggest that the high self-esteem he measure in such pupils was 'unstable'. It was beyond the scope of this study to ascertain the stability of our measures, nevertheless for 20% of the sample to score in this way was higher than would have been predicted in terms of the normal distribution of scores.

Overall the results of this survey seem to suggest that self-esteem may not be an important factor in either predicting or explaining the social, emotional and behavioural well being of the majority of children who present challenging behaviour

in schools. This conclusion would appear to concur with the review of Emler (2003) that low self esteem did not seem to be associated with anti-social behaviour. There would appear to be a group of pupils in SEBD specialist schools with extremely low or high measured self-esteem. The extent to which these unusual scores influence or affect the behaviour of these pupils is unclear.

In terms of the pupil's Locus of Control there would appear to be a marked difference in the between the scores in the primary and secondary sample. As predicted the secondary pupils in our sample included a large number of pupils whose locus of control appear in the 'External' category. Typically these pupils appeared not to always acknowledge the consequences of their behaviour and hence may be reluctant to take responsibility for their actions. In contrast the junior pupils in the sample only one appeared in the 'External' category while the majority appeared to be in the 'Normal' range. On face value therefore Locus of Control does not appear to be a problem for the junior pupils but may be an important issue for a large proportion of the older pupils and one that their schools may wish to address. It could be argued that the fact that the tendency of older pupils attributed less of a causal link between their own behaviour and its outcomes is that their behaviour has become more entrenched and resistant to change.

## Implications

The implications of this study are three fold.

First it is clear that many statements of special educational need at present being produced by Educational Authorities do not necessarily reflect the needs of the

child, at least as far as self esteem is concerned. The writers of Statements seem to assume, as far as pupils who are destined for placement at special schools designed to meet the needs of pupils described as having Social, Emotional and Behaviour Difficulties are concerned, that they have special needs that include a need to enhance self-esteem. Further more they do so in the belief that such improvements will lead to improvements in behaviour and well being. This assumption does not appear to be based on good evidence nor is it supported by the results of this study.

Statements are very important documents in the lives of pupils. They should be based on sound assessment and clearly reflect the needs of the pupil. The results of this study suggest that in some elements, namely assessment the pupils' self-esteem, many statements do not fully reflect the needs of the pupils. Therefore there is a need for all writers of statements to revise some aspects of their work so that the needs of pupils fully reflect their final statement.

Second, those whose responsibility it is to provide evidence to education authorities on pupils who present with challenging behaviour, emotional or social need have a responsibility to carry out a comprehensive assessment of all pupils. If they feel the pupils self esteem is an important feature of their personality or an important contributory factor affecting the pupil's behaviour then they should fully assess that self esteem using either a standardised assessment measure or other procedure. The evidence of this survey of the self-esteem of pupils in this sector of specialist education show that over a third, 36%, have abnormally high or low self-esteem. It is important that these pupils are identified and that evidence is provided to both Local Authorities and the schools they eventually attend so that decisions can be made on how best to address this aspect of their needs.

Third to those who teach in these specialist schools should, at present, treat written statements with caution; at least as far as any advice about building up self esteem is concerned. Most specialist schools have a social, emotion and behavioural curriculum. Such a curriculum usually has a section on building self esteem. It would be good practice before embarking on that section of the curriculum to have a base line measure of each pupil's measured self esteem. The evidence of this study suggests that low self esteem may be a significant problem for a proportion of pupils (16%), but equally, an especially high and perhaps unrealistic self-esteem may also be an important contributory factor in the behaviour of another sizable proportion (20%) of pupils, especially those of secondary school age.

Once the self-esteem of each pupil has been properly assessed the next issue becomes what to do about it. The evidence of the effectiveness of intervention programmes is generally positive, but not universal. Haney and Dujlak (1998) point out in an analysis of over 116 studies, 60% of programmes reported positive changes in measured self-esteem, although worryingly 12.5% actually produced negative changes. In his review Emler (2001) suggests that those programmes that use a broad cognitive behavioural approach seem to be particularly successful. He draws attention to one approach by Pope, McHale and Craighead (1988) which helped young people address both their aspirations and achievements and therefore reach a more balanced self appraisal. This programme therefore appeared to be suitable for those individuals who were described by Kernis et al (1989) as having a high but unstable self-esteem. Teachers also need to be aware that, as Flouri et al (2006) point out, self-esteem alone may not be the only factor effecting young people's behaviour. They suggest that it is self-esteem compounded with 'Locus of Control' that appears to be important. As this study has shown the 'Locus of Control' for some of the older SEBD population shows

an over representation of young people who scored in the 'External' range. This would suggest that teachers would be wise to address both these issues with their pupils if they wish to see changes in both attitude and behaviour.

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