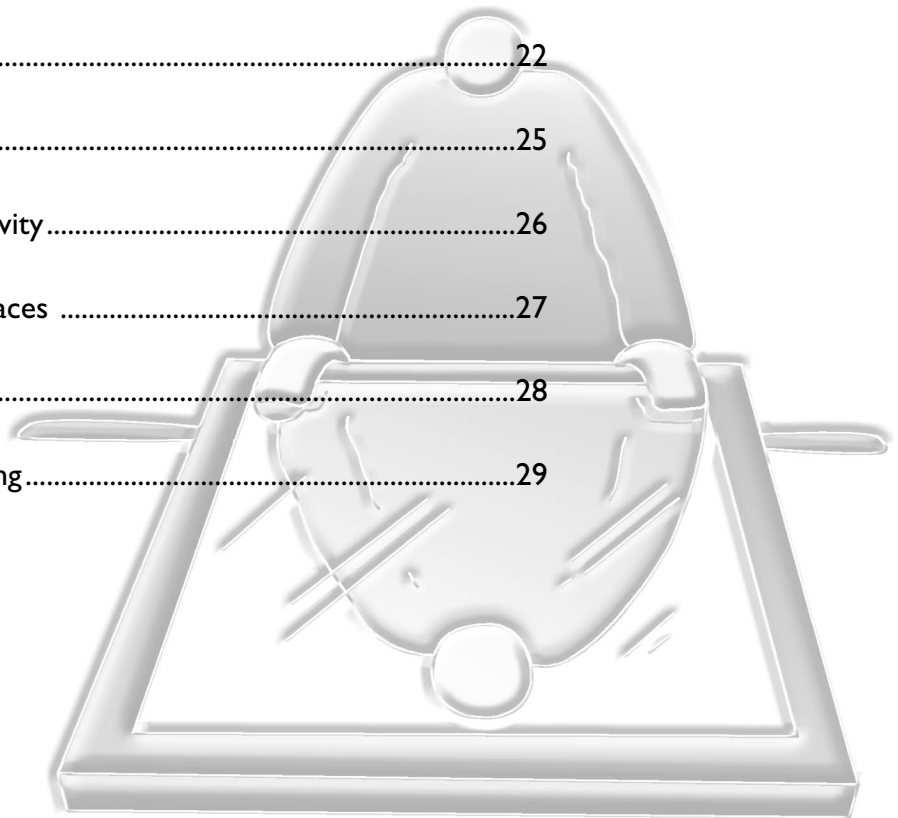




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The self-esteem movement

'We think too much and feel too little'.

Bertrand Russell

There is such a strong level of belief in the importance of self-esteem amongst a large number of teachers and educationists in Britain that it's not an exaggeration to suggest that there is a self-esteem movement in education. An illustration of this is the self-esteem network that exists to raise awareness about the benefits of high self-esteem. It publishes a self-esteem directory and is associated with the International Council for Self-Esteem.

Since William James made the 'self' a legitimate study for psychology at the end of the 19th century, a huge amount has been written about self-esteem. The largest body of research has been in the United States, where Nathaniel Branden and others have done pioneering work over many decades. California led the way in 1987 by setting up a task force on self-esteem and since then many other states have followed suit.

The self-esteem movement stresses the importance of emotions, values and relationships. It also emphasises human beings' need for wholeness, for inner harmony and points out that the education system seems to want to separate thinking from feeling and the mind from the body.

There is a lot of common ground with those who promote positive thinking (see Occasional Paper 6) but there are also some differences. The emphasis in positive thinking is on your goals to achieve success and the emphasis in self-esteem is on yourself to obtain happiness and fulfilment. According to the self-esteem directory, however, it is not a simple formula for being happy, but a profound reality which provides practical insights into how to live well and treat others so that we all live well.

They make the point that not only is self-esteem important, but that we can do something about our own self-esteem and help others to develop theirs. Parents mould their children's self-esteem, teachers and schools have a powerful influence on the self-esteem of young people and employers and the workplace also affect the self-esteem of their employees.

The self-esteem movement points to a wide range of evidence to support its views including research on the brain. It also points to the work of psychologists such as Howard Gardner and Daniel Goleman who have stressed the importance of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence and emotional intelligence. The Self-Esteem Directory gives examples of the growing volume of evidence about the importance of self-esteem from the evaluation of projects throughout the world in parenting, education, schools, work with young offenders and other spheres of life.

Being your own best friend

Self-esteem, on the face of it, seems to be a fairly simple concept. But there has been a vast quantity of theory, research and discussion on the topic over the years and, despite this, what healthy, authentic self-esteem actually is remains fairly elusive. Lots of different overlapping terms seem to be used almost interchangeably with self-esteem, for instance self-concept, self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-image, self-belief, self-respect. Many definitions are either too vague or too complex, and like a lot of things in this life it means different things to different people.

It's perhaps best to start by trying to rule out some of the myths and misconceptions around self-esteem and to rule out what healthy and authentic self-esteem is not.

Having self-esteem is not:

about being vain and boastful

(indeed it is thought this often can be a way of hiding low self-esteem – people who appear to believe that they are perfect, who boast and keep telling us how wonderful they are usually are trying to convince themselves)

about being selfish or self-centred

(it's very difficult to create healthy self-esteem without reference to others, and the healthier our self-esteem the more we are inclined to treat others with respect, goodwill and fairness)

simply about having certain attributes such as self-confidence, self-awareness, self-respect or self-belief

(though they are likely to be signs of healthy self-esteem)

a simple formula or an effortless solution for being happy and successful

(indeed many people are successful in a career and have low self-esteem: it's more about having an inner capacity to be happy and successful)

linked to academic intelligence.

(brilliant people with low self-esteem act against their own interests every day)

There are various ways of defining self-esteem. Some people talk about our self-esteem being dependent on the discrepancy between our self-image and our ideal self – the smaller the gap the stronger our self-esteem. This seems to me to be a bit of a complex way of defining it.

