

Resource 8: Self-esteem

(Extracted from 'Empowering Ourselves and Transforming Schools' by Judith W Irwin, p183)

'No book on empowerment can say enough about self-esteem. Indeed, as I have been reading the literature on self-esteem, I have begun to think that self-esteem and empowerment are almost synonymous. Put simply, self-esteem means feeling competent and worthy. Empowerment includes this as well as knowing what you want and need, knowing how to go about creating it, and actually going through with it.

Nathaniel Branden, one of the foremost writers on self-esteem, has defined it as:

"the experience that we are appropriate to life and to the requirements of life. More specifically, self-esteem is...

1. Confidence in our ability to think and to cope with the basic challenges of life.
2. Confidence in our right to be happy, the feeling of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants and to enjoy the fruits of our efforts."

These two characteristics can be called self-efficacy and self-respect. The former helps us to feel in control of what happens to us and the latter helps us to connect with others without fear of losing ourselves in the process.

Real self-esteem cannot be tied to the judgements of others or even to external accomplishments. The greater our self-esteem, the more respectfully we interact with others. Thus, in our current world, as we move toward power-to/power-with rather than power-over, we need self-esteem more than ever...

In our everyday lives, then, self-esteem has everything to do with responsibility, consciousness and integrity. When we make our own choices and set our own goals, we strengthen our self-esteem. When we turn those choices over to others, we weaken our self-esteem. If we want to help others to build their self-esteem, we need to work toward environments in which they can make their own choices, seek understanding and new knowledge, take risks, set goals, and be honest...

If we want to build our own self-esteem, we must make sure that our actions reflect our values and make choices that reflect our concern for honesty, caring and commitment. We must have the courage to think independently, persevere in the face of obstacles, and accept, express and assert ourselves when appropriate.'