

School education must meet the self-esteem needs of adolescents

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Abstract: Adolescence is a peak period for physical and mental development and a critical period for the development of self-esteem. Whether the self-esteem needs of adolescents are met affects their growth and development. To address the self-esteem needs of adolescents, schools should implement respect education; teachers should maintain the self-esteem of adolescents; schools and teachers should guide parents to value their children's self-esteem needs, enabling adolescents to form and maintain high self-esteem, thereby promoting the mental health development of adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescents, Self-esteem Needs, Critical Period, Respect Education

1. Introduction

Needs are an internal state in which an individual feels a lack of something and strives to have it satisfied [1]. Human needs are diverse and can be categorized into different types based on various criteria. The most representative is the hierarchy of needs theory proposed by the famous American humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow. Maslow believed that human needs are divided into five levels from low to high: physiological needs, safety needs, belonging and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. In his hierarchy of needs, the need for esteem is an important level, which includes self-esteem and the respect of others. It is an indispensable need, and only when the need for esteem is satisfied does one generate the need for self-actualization. The need for self-esteem is an important need during adolescence. The so-called need for self-esteem refers to the demands of adolescents for independence and freedom, seeking to be valued, appreciated, recognized, and praised by others to reflect their own value and ability and to maintain their personal self-esteem. Whether the self-esteem needs of adolescents are met will not only affect their confidence and sense of self-efficacy but also their psychological health development. Therefore, we should pay attention to the self-esteem needs of adolescents and reasonably satisfy their self-esteem needs to promote the formation of a sound personality and healthy psychological development in adolescents.

2. Adolescence is a critical period for the development of self-esteem

Self-esteem is formed and develops over time. The self-esteem formed during childhood has a certain stability. "Upon entering adolescence, self-esteem experiences a noticeable decline, but throughout the rest of adolescence, self-esteem begins to rise gradually. The downward trend of self-esteem at the beginning of adolescence may be related to the negative evaluation of the changes in physical and social roles caused by adolescent development"[2]. The adolescent stage is the period of most rapid physical development, with a rapid increase in height and weight, basically similar to adults. The changes in physical appearance continuously enhance their sense of adulthood, and they want to break free from adult constraints, resist the dependent relationship formed with adults in childhood, hope to obtain rights and status equal to adults, and yearn for understanding and respect from adults. The adolescent stage is also a period of rapid development of self-awareness, and self-esteem is an important part of self-awareness. It is a self-experience based on self-awareness, a judgment and feeling of one's own value and ability. As adolescents' self-awareness strengthens, their need for self-esteem is developing day by day, and the desire to maintain self-esteem is also stronger. However, during this period, adolescents' level of understanding is limited, making their

experience of self-esteem very intense, and their self-esteem becomes fragile and sensitive. If their need for self-esteem is not met for a long time, it will lead to low self-esteem. Therefore, the development of adolescents' self-esteem should be taken seriously, seize the critical period, care about their need for self-esteem, protect their self-esteem, and help them form high self-esteem.

3. The reasons why adolescents' needs for self-esteem are not met during their growth

Adolescents' self-awareness is strengthening, and they have a strong need and desire to maintain their self-esteem. However, in reality, their need for self-esteem is often difficult to satisfy because teachers and parents often overlook the extremely sensitive self-esteem needs of adolescents, causing their self-respect to be hurt. The reasons for not being able to meet the self-esteem needs of adolescents are multifaceted, mainly including:

3.1. Educational system reasons

3.1.1. The impact of exam-oriented education

For a long time, exam-oriented education, aimed at coping with tests and cultivating new students for higher-level schools, has seriously violated the laws of adolescent physical and mental development as well as educational principles, affecting the healthy development of adolescents' physical and mental health. Under the exam-oriented education system, scores have become the sole criterion for evaluating schools, teachers, and students, leading to continuous pressure from schools, teachers, and parents on adolescents, causing their study load to become excessive. In pursuit of scores, educational competition has been stimulated to a seriously unbalanced extent, resulting in the differentiation of students' learning levels and an increase in the number of students who struggle academically. At this point, teachers tend to focus their main efforts on a few students who are expected to advance to higher education, while abandoning or even despising the majority of students who seem to have no hope of further education, often treating them with negative words and actions. After each exam, ranking is also done in the class or even the whole school, artificially creating inequality in education. This not only discourages the majority of students from being proactive in learning but also seriously hurts their self-esteem.

3.1.2. Class size is too large

In China, the class sizes in schools are generally too large, with some having forty to fifty students, others sixty to seventy, and some even exceeding a hundred. In such large classes, it is difficult for teachers to attend to each student individually, and they often feel overwhelmed in providing the care and guidance needed by students who are struggling academically, making it challenging to tailor teaching to individual abilities. When students' grades do not improve over time, it can lead to the development of low self-esteem.

3.2. Teacher-related reasons

3.2.1. Incorrect student perspective

The sense of adulthood is continuously strengthening among adolescents, so they are also striving to break free from adult authority. They yearn for respect, understanding, and support from teachers. However, due to the authoritative status of teachers and the lack of educational theory cultivation in some teachers, some have failed to establish a correct perspective on students. They neglect the characteristics and patterns of adolescent psychological development, treating adolescents as if they were still children, lacking the respect they deserve. Teachers overlook that students are living, independent individuals, failing to respect their individual differences and independent personalities in education, insisting on uniformity. Teachers do not respect the students' agency in the educational process, viewing them as passive objects, subjects of control, and containers of knowledge. This incorrect student perspective often leads to negative emotional experiences among adolescent students and damages their self-esteem.

3.2.2. Improper teaching methods

Adolescents possess a sense of self-respect and self-love, and it is essential for teachers to respect the students' personalities and meet their needs for self-esteem. However, some teachers currently employ

education methods that are overly simplistic and harsh, ranging from criticism and scolding to physical punishment or its equivalent, causing adolescents to lose their personal dignity. There is a lack of a democratic and equal atmosphere in education, with teachers acting as authorities. They fail to provide correct evaluation and guidance for the different viewpoints and opinions of adolescent students, instead ignoring them or resorting to sarcasm and ridicule, causing undue harm to the students' self-esteem.

3.2.3. Lack of emotional investment

A teacher's emotions are multifaceted, and the love for students is an important aspect of that. Although loving students does not equate to respecting them, respecting students is a concrete manifestation of love for them. However, some teachers neither love the teaching profession nor their students, making respect for students out of the question. It is an undeniable fact that modern teachers face significant work pressure, which, when prolonged, leaves some teachers in a state of tension and anxiety. This negative emotional state causes them to lose their love and patience for adolescent students, disregarding their feelings and often hurting their self-esteem with excessive words and actions. Long-term work pressure can also lead to job burnout in some teachers, resulting in low spirits, a decline in mood, a loss of passion for their work, and an indifferent attitude towards students, often giving negative evaluations and lacking the respect that students deserve.

3.3. Parent-related reasons

3.3.1. Parents being autocratic and domineering

Parents have different parenting styles, which lead to different attitudes and methods towards their children. Authoritarian parents are autocratic and domineering, imposing strict discipline on their children. They never consider their children's need for self-esteem, often using commands and blame to force their children to submit to their will, and unthinkingly rejecting their children's decisions and choices. They impose various demands on their children, requiring absolute obedience, and if the children show the slightest disobedience or fail to meet their expectations, they are scolded, berated, and even beaten. Sometimes, this happens in front of others without any mercy, causing the children to feel humiliated and inferior. In such families, the relationship between parents and children becomes cold, distant, and even tense, and the child's level of self-esteem is also reduced.

3.3.2. Expectations being too high or too low

Every parent has certain expectations for their child, but these expectations should be based on a correct understanding of the child. Some parents do not truly understand their children and demand things from them based solely on their own subjective desires. For example, some parents have excessively high expectations for their children, beyond their capabilities in learning and activities, making it difficult for the children to meet these expectations, leading to stress, fear, and a sense of inferiority. On the other hand, some parents have expectations that are too low, seriously underestimating their children's abilities, thinking their children are beyond help or improvement, which breeds feelings of disappointment and impatience, and may even lead to neglect. Children who do not receive care, support, and help from their parents may become self-destructive and lose confidence. It is evident that parents' unrealistic expectations, whether too high or too low, will inevitably lead to low self-esteem in their children.

3.3.3. Substituting love for respect

The need for love and the need for self-esteem are two distinct needs for adolescents, but some parents confuse the two, thinking that meeting their children's need for love is equivalent to meeting their need for self-esteem. As a result, they often substitute love for respect. These parents provide meticulous care and attention to their children, taking on all responsibilities at home. When children want to do something independently, parents, out of love, either restrict or do it for them, ignoring the children's wishes. This essentially shows a lack of respect for the child, as parents deprive them of opportunities to express themselves. Children may interpret this as a lack of belief in their abilities from their parents. Over time, this not only causes children to lose their independence and autonomy but also leads to a sense of inferiority.

3.4. Peer-related reasons

Adolescence is a period of active interpersonal interaction, which is specifically manifested as follows: Adolescents place great importance on relationships with their peers and long to establish good relationships with them; Adolescents pay special attention to the attitudes, opinions, and evaluations of their peers towards them, and use these as criteria to evaluate themselves; Adolescents value their status within the group, and when they are ridiculed, criticized, neglected, or excluded by their peers, they feel lonely and inferior. If adolescents are discriminated against or not accepted by the group, they will develop negative self-evaluations, which in turn reduces their self-esteem.

3.5. Personal reasons

3.5.1. *Lack of successful experiences*

Experiences of success and failure are significant factors affecting adolescents' self-esteem, "as they are the direct experiences about their own abilities and value that adolescents obtain through their own actions"[3]. Adolescents have a strong need for self-esteem and are competitive, which makes them prone to feelings of defeat and inferiority when facing failure. If adolescents experience failure in their previous learning and activities, they may doubt their abilities, and repeated failures can create immense psychological pressure, leading to a loss of confidence and a decrease in self-efficacy. This incorrect attribution can induce negative psychological defenses in adolescents, leading to feelings of inferiority and fear, which will further affect their future learning and activity performance, creating a vicious cycle.

3.5.2. *Unrealistic comparisons*

How adolescents view and evaluate themselves depends to some extent on how they compare their own performance with that of others, especially their peers. Adolescents are particularly inclined to judge themselves through comparisons with their peers. During the period of self-concept formation, if they fail to develop a correct self-perception or a clear self-concept, they may choose unrealistic comparison targets. If the comparison targets are set too high, and they feel unable to catch up or surpass them, it can lead to a sense of helplessness, reduced self-efficacy, and feelings of inferiority.

4. Measures to meet the self-esteem needs of adolescents

Adolescents have a strong need for self-esteem, and positive attention from others, such as praise and respect, are important factors in meeting the self-esteem needs of adolescents. If the self-esteem needs of adolescents are not met over the long term, it will inevitably lead to low self-esteem, depressive emotions, and even disappointment and despair. Therefore, schools, teachers, and parents need to timely meet the self-esteem needs of adolescents to protect their self-respect.

4.1. Schools should emphasize respect education

To meet the needs of educational development, schools should transform from exam-oriented education to quality education and implement it effectively. The purpose of quality education is to promote the comprehensive development of students' physical and mental health, and conducting respect education contributes to the psychological health development of adolescents. Respect education is both an educational concept and a practical educational behavior, with schools being the main battleground for implementing respect education. Therefore, schools must fully exert their unique role to make respect education the core of the school culture. Under respect education, school leaders must be people-oriented and uphold the dignity of teachers and students; teachers must value every student and maintain their self-esteem; students must regulate their behavior and learn to respect others. In summary, by carrying out respect education, schools can make it a guiding value and behavior for both teachers and students, thereby building a harmonious and happy campus.

4.2. Teachers must protect the self-esteem of adolescents

4.2.1. *Respect and trust students to build a harmonious teacher-student relationship*

Teachers must respect and trust their students, treating each one equally and fairly. Teachers should respect the dignity of their students, have faith in their abilities, and regularly provide care, help, and support, especially for those students who are often labeled as underachievers, nurturing their self-esteem and confidence, as Sukhomlinsky said: "Let every student walk with their head held high." By respecting and trusting students, teachers give them opportunities to showcase themselves, listen to their voices, and make students feel that there is equality between teachers and students, and that their existence is valuable, thus filling them with hope for themselves. When teachers respect and trust their students, it not only strengthens the students' self-esteem and confidence but also teaches the students to respect and trust others. When teachers respect and trust their students, students will also respect and trust their teachers. In this mutual respect and trust, students develop a sense of identification with their teachers and open up to them, leading to a psychological integration between teachers and students and establishing a harmonious teacher-student relationship. This harmonious relationship, in turn, promotes the enhancement of adolescents' self-esteem levels.

4.2.2. Praise and encouragement as the main approach, to create a democratic atmosphere

Teachers should primarily use praise and encouragement when dealing with adolescent students, providing them with positive evaluations, which increases the students' self-expectations. Teachers are important figures who influence how adolescent students establish self-evaluations. Therefore, teachers should understand the strengths and weaknesses of their students and be adept at discovering their shining points, offering timely praise and encouragement. This can awaken students, help them escape from inferiority, and gain a sense of satisfaction and pride, allowing their potential to be unleashed and utilized. Even when criticizing students, teachers should use positive language as much as possible and master the art of criticism. Punishing students should also be done in a way that avoids negative impacts to prevent hurting the students' self-esteem.

Teachers should abandon an authoritative attitude and communicate with students on an equal footing, being good at listening to students' ideas and opinions, and actively adopting reasonable views and suggestions. For those that are unreasonable or biased, teachers should provide correct guidance or organize discussions to create a democratic atmosphere. In this democratic atmosphere, students can fully express their wishes and opinions, leading to a sense of self-worth and presence, and their need for self-esteem is naturally met.

4.2.3. Provide success experiences and guide positive attribution

Experiences of success and failure directly affect the development of adolescents' self-esteem. Generally speaking, experiences of success can enhance self-esteem, while experiences of failure can lead to feelings of inferiority. Since adolescents' self-esteem is highly sensitive and fragile, their ability to pursue self-esteem is often marked by their ability to achieve success, as success is a sign of ability and value, bringing positive emotional experiences and evaluations of worth [4]. Therefore, teachers should provide adolescents with various opportunities and conditions for success, allowing them to continually experience success, gain satisfaction and pride, and thus strengthen their confidence and competence, leading to high self-esteem. Additionally, for adolescents' successes, teachers should guide them to attribute their achievements to internal factors such as their own abilities or efforts, rather than external factors like help from others or luck, in order to maintain their positive self-assessment and high self-esteem.

4.2.4. Help students develop accurate self-awareness and choose appropriate comparison targets

Adolescence is a critical period for the formation of self-awareness, with self-recognition and self-evaluation being key components of self-awareness. Teachers should help adolescents understand their own characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses to form an accurate self-recognition. They should also assist adolescents in choosing comparison targets based on their actual situation and teach them to select peers who are at a similar level and capability as comparison targets. This way, students will feel that they are not inferior to others, have confidence to catch up with or surpass their peers, thus forming a higher self-evaluation and meeting their need for self-esteem.

4.2.5. *Educate students on mutual respect and love, and establish friendly peer relationships*

Peer relationships have a significant impact on the formation of adolescents' self-esteem. Adolescents place great importance on the attitudes and evaluations of their peers and often reflect on and evaluate themselves based on their peers' perspectives. Therefore, teachers must educate students to care for, help, understand, tolerate, and respect each other, and to avoid discriminating against or mocking their peers, and certainly not to exclude or isolate them. By establishing friendly relationships among classmates and peers, each individual in the group will feel accepted, respected, indispensable, and valuable, which will help them build and maintain high self-esteem.

4.3. **Schools and teachers should guide parents to emphasize their children's self-esteem needs**

Parents are advised to adopt proper parenting styles and create a democratic family atmosphere. Adolescence is a critical period for the development of self-esteem, and schools and teachers should recommend that parents use a democratic parenting style to create a warm and supportive family environment. Democratic parenting does not mean permissiveness; it is about setting reasonable expectations for children based on respect and understanding. In such families, parents respect their children's choices and decisions and provide support and guidance. Parents not only inform children about acceptable and unacceptable behaviors but also explain the reasons behind these expectations, so that children willingly accept their parents' requirements and make the right choices. In these families, children are equal members with the right to participate in decision-making, and their opinions and views are respected. Children raised in such environments are happy, lively, confident, and independent, with their self-esteem continuously improving.

Guiding parents in appreciative education to establish a positive parent-child relationship is essential. Adolescents' sense of adulthood is growing, yet their self-esteem is fragile, and they crave respect, recognition, praise, and affirmation from their parents. Schools and teachers should guide parents to understand the physical and mental development characteristics and growth patterns of their children, practice appreciative education, and build a positive interactive parent-child relationship. Parents should communicate regularly with their children, listen to their voices, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and treat them kindly, viewing them positively and offering praise and encouragement. When children achieve success, parents should provide timely affirmation and encouragement, sharing in their joy and boosting their confidence. When children fall short or make mistakes, parents should not simply blame them or criticize them publicly; instead, they should offer effective help and proper guidance, ensuring that children feel genuinely cared for and that their self-esteem is protected.

Helping parents form reasonable expectations based on their children's realities is also important. Schools and teachers should assist parents in fully understanding their children and facing their children's realities to form reasonable expectations. Parents are advised not to use others or themselves as a benchmark for their children but to set reasonable expectations based on their children's actual situations. Guiding children to transform their parents' expectations into their own developmental needs and goals can create internal motivation, thereby promoting the child's growth and the achievement of their goals. As children achieve these goals, their need for self-esteem is met, and their confidence continues to grow.

In summary, adolescence is a critical period for the development of self-esteem. Schools, teachers, and parents must all pay attention to the self-esteem needs of adolescents and reasonably meet these needs, enabling adolescents to establish and maintain high self-esteem, thus promoting their psychological health development.

5. **Conclusion**

This article thoroughly explores the importance of adolescents' self-esteem needs and the potential issues they may face during their growth, proposing corresponding solutions. It first emphasizes the significance of the need for respect within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, particularly the key role of self-esteem during adolescence. The article then analyzes the developmental stages of adolescent self-esteem, noting that puberty is a critical period for its development, and discusses various reasons why adolescents' self-esteem needs may not be met, including educational systems, attitudes and methods of teachers and parents, peer relationships, and factors within the adolescents themselves.

The article concludes with measures to meet the self-esteem needs of adolescents, including schools valuing respect education, teachers safeguarding the self-esteem of young people, and parents providing proper upbringing and reasonable expectations. These measures aim to create a supportive environment for adolescents through the joint efforts of schools, teachers, and parents, helping them to establish and maintain high self-esteem and promoting their psychological health development. In summary, the article highlights the importance of all sectors of society paying attention to and fulfilling the self-esteem needs of adolescents, as well as the necessity of taking comprehensive measures to protect and nurture the self-esteem of young people to promote their healthy development.

6. References

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