

**THE EFFECTS OF CLASSROOM MEETINGS
ON SELF-CONCEPTS**

BY

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THE EFFECTS OF CLASSROOM MEETINGS
ON SELF-CONCEPTS

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Judith Ann Wilson entitled "The Effects of Classroom Meetings on Self-Concepts." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in General Psychology.


Major Professor

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Dean of the Graduate School

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A person's self-concept controls remarkably much of what he feels, thinks, and becomes. Wide agreement seems to exist that our feelings about ourselves largely determine what we are as children and as adults. Whether we see ourselves as good or bad, healthy or ill, attractive or unattractive, successful or unsuccessful will in large measure affect our relationship with ourselves, our family, our friends, and society as a whole.

Many factors influence the ways in which we come to perceive ourselves. Family relationships, physical appearance, peer approval, social status, and religious affiliations are but a few examples of influences on our self-concept.

School experiences are among the major molders of self-concepts of children and are continuing influences on adults. A child enters school when young and easily influenced and usually remains there for most of the waking hours of approximately half the days of that time. Little wonder then that school experiences can largely affect a child's identity particularly concerning whether he sees himself as a success or a failure.

In a broad survey of American education, Silberman (1970) contends that our schools are in a crisis condition. In his view there are many elements responsible for this condition including uninteresting, irrelevant subject matter, cold, uncaring teachers, and the lack of success for many students.

Students who begin school as interested and excited youngsters too soon become bored; and for many of these, failure results. Holt (1969) contends that imagination and excitement are often snuffed out because students do not have the opportunity to express themselves because, quite simply, teachers do too much of the talking. Even when discussions do take place in class and the student supposedly has the chance to express himself, too often he cannot. The teacher often requires thinking and talking to be directed toward the goal of answering a pointed question with a concrete answer. Thus, creative thinking and the free exchange of ideas are stifled.

A voice expressing great concern in the area of school failure is that of William Glasser, a psychiatrist. He contends (1969, c) that all people need an identity. He describes it as the "basic human need (1969, a)." Identity may take the form of a failure identity or a success identity (1969, c).

There are two basic pathways to a success identity. One is the ability to give love and the ability to accept love. The second is the ability to feel worthwhile and to believe that others consider one

worthwhile (Glasser, 1965; Glasser, 1969, a). Glasser (1969, b) has shown increasing concern that too many students do not achieve this success identity and instead become convinced that they are failures. As a result these students take the failure pathway that usually consists of either delinquency or withdrawal from positive relationships with others (Glasser, 1969, a).

Glasser (1969, c) contends that it is the school's responsibility to help these students overcome these failure identities and to prevent them from developing in others. He explains that the most fundamental requirement for doing this is through human personal involvement, i.e., teachers and administrators need to care about students as important unique human beings (1969, a). The failing child must be helped to overcome the great loneliness and isolation that he feels, and the already successful child must continue to feel so (Glasser, 1969, a).

Glasser makes a number of suggestions for eliminating failure and thereby vastly improving the school situation. One vital and necessary technique is that of the classroom meeting which he describes as the most important opportunity for students and teachers to become involved with each other (1969, c). Glasser recommends that these meetings be instituted at the beginning of the school year and be continued regularly and frequently throughout the school year. In fact, he contends that it is most effective for these meetings to be held

daily with short periods of time for very young students and longer periods for older ones (Glasser, 1969, c).

Glasser describes in detail three types of classroom meetings:

(1) Social problem-solving, which deals with problems arising in the students' social and educational behavior; (2) Open-ended, which deals with any topic that is viewed as relevant; (3) Educational-diagnostic, which helps determine how well students grasp certain curriculum concepts (1969, c).

Statement of the Problem

"Most children in school fail (Holt, p. xiii, 1964)." This rather alarming statement might very easily be the subject of debate, but certainly few people would argue with the fact that many students fail. Indeed, most educators would probably agree that too many fail.

Failure in the schools has been and continues to be an area of great concern among teachers, administrators, parents, and anyone vitally interested in the process of education. Students who fail consistently seem to lack motivation and the desire to do anything well. Frequently it is this group of students who cause the problems in schools. For an individual the implications of failure become deeply ingrained into his concept of himself. He may grow to reject himself as worthless and withdraw from society because he believes he is not good enough to participate. He may strike back in anger to cry out

against his feelings. He may drown himself in alcohol or drugs to deny what he feels himself to be. In general, then, it seems safely said that school failure can produce detrimental, if not disastrous, effects on an individual.

Widespread agreement seems to exist that something must be done to alleviate this chronic element of failure in our schools for it is neither productive nor helpful to those people who directly experience the failure or to society as a whole. Thus, it was deemed important to take a technique advanced to help reduce failure in a classroom and determine if the technique had an effect on changing the self-concept of members of the class.

Purpose of the Study

Because the activities that go on in school are directly related to a student's success or failure and consequent perception of self, it was seen as important to determine if the specific type of activity designed to reduce school failure could be used as a tool for changing student self-concepts. The chosen activity was daily open-ended classroom meetings advocated by William Glasser. To measure self-concepts, the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was given before the meetings were instituted and again at their conclusion. From this the effects of the classroom meetings could possibly be seen and if successful could be more widely used in schools to help reduce failure.

Statement of the Hypothesis

The present study was concerned with the effects of daily open-ended classroom meetings on the self-concepts of a class of seventh grade students as measured by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. The classroom involved in the meetings was compared on a pretest and posttest measure of their self-concepts with a class which was not involved in a program of such classroom meetings. The hypothesis, stated in the null form, is that there will be no significant difference in the self-concept scores of a seventh grade class participating in daily classroom meetings and those of a seventh grade class involved in no such activity.

Review of the Literature

Schools which have initiated classroom meetings report enthusiasm from both teachers and students (Glasser, 1969, c). Glasser attributes this to the consideration that ideally in these meetings students do not fail; they succeed. Their ideas are neither criticized nor attacked but rather are accepted and explored. This increased acceptance of the students and their ideas reportedly leads to greater caring and respect for others as well as increased acceptance and respect for self, the conditions necessary for a success identity. Glasser reports that he has conducted hundreds of demonstration classroom meetings

over the past several years and is convinced that they are effective in producing beneficial changes in students (1969, c).

Glasser's technique of classroom meetings has been successfully applied in several schools in the Los Angeles, California, area including Miramonte School, 75th Street School, Melrose School, and the Ventura School for Girls (1969, c). One school reports increased maturity of students, increased thought by students on their problems and the problems of society, increased involvement between teachers and students, and increased interest in "personal adjustment" especially by the boys (O'Donnell & Maxwell, p. 72-73, 1971).

The open-ended discussion is described by another report as the most useful of the three types (Hawes, 1969). This type allows much involvement because topics are discussed which are of importance to the lives of the students. These open-ended classroom meetings "are designed to supplement the academic program by stimulating the children to think and respond (Hawes, p. 122, 1969)." In addition, "the sessions provide the children with a situation that gives each pupil the opportunity for intellectual success without the possibility of failure (Hawes, p. 122, 1969)." Although there are apparently many school systems which are now using the discussion groups, there appears to be a paucity of reported research on the effectiveness of the group discussions.

CHAPTER II

PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Subjects

The subjects for the present study were students at Burt Junior High School, Clarksville, Tennessee, a school composed of approximately 650 seventh graders. Participants in the present study were the members of two science classes taught by the same teacher. One class had thirty-six members, the other thirty-one. Both groups were labelled as low-average in school achievement and were selected for study because it was noted that the incidence of failure in school would be greater for these groups than for a higher track of students. The morning class of thirty-six members was selected to be the participants in the program of daily open-ended classroom meetings. The afternoon class of thirty-one served as a control group.

Description of Instrument

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was used to determine the children's perceptions of self (Piers & Harris, 1969). It was used as both the pretest and posttest measure of self-concept. The scale, as developed by Ellen V. Piers and Dale Harris, is designed to measure such factors relating to self-concept as happiness,

behavior, anxiety, popularity, academics, and appearance (Piers & Harris, 1964). The level of difficulty of comprehension of this instrument was considered appropriate for the subjects of the present study as the manual states the instrument is designed for a third grade reading level. Administration and scoring procedures as outlined in the test manual were followed in the study (Piers & Harris, 1969).

The instrument is composed of eighty items to which the examinee circles a yes or no response. Scoring is in the direction of a high, rather than low or inadequate, self-concept (Piers & Harris, 1969).

A reliability coefficient of .77 was reported by Piers and Harris (1969) to be the best approximation of this instrument's stability over time. A standard error of measurement of about six points has been determined with a twelve point difference required for significance at the .05 level of confidence. Piers and Harris therefore conclude that any change in the self-concept scores of less than ten points cannot be considered of importance. Further, the authors report that group means appear to rise on retests with this instrument therefore the use of control groups is strongly recommended. Piers and Harris report efforts at content and construct validation of this instrument as being relatively successful (1969).

Procedure

The guidance counselor at Burt Junior High School presented the proposal for the study to the faculty of the school after permission was secured from the director of schools to conduct the study at Burt.

Following this presentation one of the science teachers volunteered her services and her classes for participation. Previous to the initiation of the classroom meetings themselves, a number of planning sessions were held with the teacher. Because Glasser recommends that the teacher actually lead the meetings and because in the present study the researcher would be the leader, it was felt that better relations could be established with the class if the teacher worked closely with the researcher on the project. Because of the teacher's eagerness to participate and interest in the work, a good working team was established.

Before beginning the daily meetings, the researcher worked for one hour per day for one week in the classroom that was to undergo the program of meetings. It was felt that the class should become acclimated to the presence of a new individual in their midst. This time was spent chiefly in helping students individually as they did the various tasks assigned to them by their instructor. On the last day of this orientation week, the class was presented with a description of the daily classroom meetings. The purpose, goals, and responsibilities of the group were each discussed. Student responsibility for

listening and contributing to the meetings was emphasized. Some of the topics that were being planned for discussion were announced and the students were encouraged to begin thinking of topics they might wish to discuss.

On the day prior to the onset of the program of daily discussions, the teacher administered to two of her classes the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. One of the classes, hereafter denoted the experimental group, was to participate in the classroom meetings. The other group, hereafter denoted the control group, would not be involved in any such activities. Scores were obtained from this first administration of the instrument and were used to determine if the two groups differed significantly at the outset.

On the day following the pretesting, the program of daily open-ended classroom meetings was begun and was continued for thirty-two consecutive school days. The meetings were held each day for approximately thirty minutes in the cafeteria. Meetings could not be held in the science classroom because nonmovable furniture therein prohibited the arrangement into a circle, which Glasser insists is necessary for effective communication (1969, c). Thus, the group and both leaders were seated in a circle for all meetings. The leaders changed their seating positions each day in the group also as Glasser recommends. Following each day's meeting in the cafeteria, the class returned to its room for the remainder of the class period.

The open-ended classroom meeting was chosen as the only type of the three used by Glasser (1969, c) to be employed in the present study. Glasser reports that maximum participant involvement is obtained more quickly with the open-ended group. Also topics for discussion could be more conveniently developed for this type of discussion because it was not possible to take the entire class period with the group each day in order to develop social-problem solving and educational-diagnostic subjects. A third reason for the selection of the open-ended type was the number of reports of success with this kind of meeting (Glasser, 1969, c). These open-ended meetings followed as closely as possible, without being flexible, the guidelines as set forth by William Glasser (1969, c).

Topics for discussion came from four chief sources: (1) those suggested by Glasser in his book, Schools Without Failure, (2) those developed by the researcher, (3) those developed jointly by the teacher and researcher, and (4) those suggested by the students. The typical procedure involved the researcher opening each session with a question followed by student response. Every attempt was made to allow the expression of interest by the students determine the course of the rest of the session. Frequently the students wanted matters discussed that they viewed as important, and the discussion would focus on their concerns. However, both leaders worked diligently to keep discussions

directed toward a broad goal of better understanding of self and others rather than allowing them to deteriorate to discussions of trivia with little intent or purpose behind them.

Generally the group met as a whole but on a few occasions it was broken down into smaller discussion groups. This breakdown was most effective when one leader took half the group and the other leader the rest. Groups of smaller size with the two leaders moving from one to another were for the greater part too unstructured for these students to continue moving toward the group goals of listening and participating respectfully with each other. A particularly effective division of the group was grouping by sexes, with boys in one group and the girls in another. The leaders both felt participation was excellent on these days.

Occasionally writing exercises were used for approximately the first ten minutes of the session with the topic written on being used as the springboard for discussion. For example, writing down three wishes or voting for favorite stars, songs, and television programs were activities that stimulated good participation. Also role playing was used with the situation being analyzed following its enactment.

Participation ranged from excellent to poor with it most frequently being good. Perhaps the least constructive days were those when a substitute teacher was present rather than the regular teacher. The presence of the regular teacher did seem to cause the group to be

more attentive. Also some topics resulted in better participation and communication than did others. Particularly effective topics were those dealing with school, peer and family relationships, sports, and current fads and fashions. Less effective topics were travel, money, and reading.

Two days following the conclusion of the group meetings the teacher re-administered the Piers-Harris scale to both the experimental and control groups in order to obtain a posttest score. There was a period of forty-five days between the first and second administrations of the test.

Analysis of Data

Following the scoring of the pretests and posttests, the scores of subjects who had been present for only one of the testing sessions were eliminated. Thus, only those subjects who had both pretest and posttest scores were included in the analysis of the data.

To analyze the data, t tests for the independent groups were run on the pretest data set and on the posttest data set. There were thirty-one subjects from the experimental group and twenty-five from the control present for both test administrations. Significance was tested at the .05 level of confidence.

The analysis of the pretest data yielded the following results:
 $t = 0.164$, $df = 54$, $p > .05$. The mean of the experimental group scores

was 53.45. The control group mean was 52.84. The self-concept scores of the two groups were thus not significantly different on the pretest. Table 1 presents the pretest results.

Table 1
Differences in Mean Pretest Self-Concept Scores
of Experimental and Control Groups

Subjects	N	Mean Score	df	t-value	t-.05
Experimental	31	53.45			
Control	25	52.84	54	0.164	2.042*

*.05 level of confidence

The results of the analysis of the posttest scores are as follows: $t = 0.195$, $df = 54$, $p > .05$. The mean of the posttest scores of the experimental group was 53.87 and of the control group 54.64. The self-concept scores of the two groups were not significantly different on the posttest. The posttest results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Differences in Mean Posttest Self-Concept Scores
of Experimental and Control Groups

Subjects	N	Mean Score	df	t-value	t-.05
Experimental	31	53.87			
Control	25	54.64	54	0.195	2.042*

*.05 level of confidence

Interpretation of Data

The lack of a significant difference on pretest scores for experimental and control groups ($t = 0.164$, $p > .05$) suggests that the program of daily classroom meetings was instituted with a group not significantly different from a class undergoing no such treatment. Thus, had a significant difference on posttest results been found the conclusion might have been supported that the classroom meetings affected the self-concepts of these seventh graders. However, a significant posttest difference was not found thus supporting the null hypothesis that there were no differences between the groups ($t = 0.195$, $p > .05$).

Subjective Verbal Evaluations

The regular classroom teacher reported improvement in the experimental group's behavior and attitude when they returned to the

regular classroom each day following the discussion group. Several explanations of this are possible with the one most strongly offered by the teacher being that it broke the rather long fifty-five minute class period down into two smaller segments thus not requiring these seventh graders to maintain their attention span to the classroom setting and academic affairs only for this lengthy period of time. The teacher reported that she was very enthusiastic throughout the course of the meetings and at their conclusion expressed a desire to continue them until the end of the year with the present group and to institute them next year with other classes.

Student evaluations of the group meetings were all positive but for various reasons. Some reported that they enjoyed being out of class for half an hour with few demands placed upon them. Others reported that they liked to participate in discussions with their classmates thus becoming better acquainted with them. Some said the meetings helped them better understand other sexes and races. A few students mentioned that it was good to be able to talk to and listen to adults on topics not typically discussed in school. No student reported a change in his feelings about himself as a result of the discussions. These comments were made verbally to the researcher on the day of the posttesting after the group was asked to express its opinion of the meetings.

CHAPTER III

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The present study was designed primarily to determine if a program of daily open-ended classroom discussions would be an effective tool for changing the self-concepts of a class of seventh grade students at Burt Junior High School in Clarksville, Tennessee. The discussion group was compared on pre- and posttest measures of self-concept to a group which did not participate in daily meetings. The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was used to measure self-concept.

The participants in the experimental group were labelled a low-average class, and they had been selected as the subjects for the study because it was felt that their experiences with school might not have been as favorable as those of a higher ability group and that as a result their self-concepts might be more in need of efforts to increase them. The control group was also a low-average class conducted by the same teacher as the experimental class. These two groups were chosen because their similarities would possibly serve as controls for some degree of error.

Pretest data indicated that the two groups involved in this study were not significantly different on their self-concept scores. Thus, two groups essentially equal on this measure could be treated differently and compared at the end of the treatment to see if significant changes had occurred as a result of the classroom meetings.

The experimental group participated in daily classroom discussions for thirty-two consecutive school days. These sessions followed generally the outline for such meetings as developed by William Glasser (1969, c). Meetings were held for approximately thirty minutes each day. The researcher in conjunction with the classroom teacher conducted the meetings using topics that were considered relevant to seventh grade youngsters.

The analysis of the posttest data supported the null hypothesis that there was no significant difference between the two groups on the self-concept measures. The treatment approach with one group did not cause measured self-concepts to vary from those of an untreated group. Verbal reports from the participating teacher and students were positive in support of the program of daily classroom meetings.

Conclusions

The lack of a statistically significant difference as measured by the Piers-Harris scale on the posttest measures indicates that the self-concepts of the seventh grade experimental group were not changed

by the daily open-ended classroom meetings. Thus, statistically the implemented program of discussions within the experimental group did not work to cause changes in the self-concepts of these school children.

However, positive verbal reports from the participating students and teacher suggest that to some degree understanding of others, enjoyment of school, and knowledge of the surrounding world were increased through this daily group activity. Thus, while failing to reach the criterion to show significantly increased self-concepts, some worthwhile effects appear to have resulted from this period of classroom meetings. The lack of statistical significance might be attributed to a number of factors. For example, the total time involved from the administration of the pretest to the posttest was only forty-five days thus suggesting the possibility that there was a lack of sufficient time for a significant change in self-concept to occur. Also, other experiences in the school may have interfered with the group's progress. Further, the self-concept measure may have been inappropriate as a measure of what the group was affecting.

Recommendations for Further Research

Because the verbal reports from participants in the present study were positive, it is recommended that this type of group experience be given further study. Perhaps a general recommendation

should be that Glasser's outline for a program of daily classroom meetings as described in Schools Without Failure should be followed more closely. Specifically this broad recommendation would include the following considerations:

1. The classroom teacher should be the leader of the daily meetings in his or her own room as opposed to an outsider coming in to direct the group.
2. Meetings should be held within the classroom itself rather than elsewhere in the school so that feelings generated in the daily meetings might become directly associated with the classroom itself.
3. Meetings should start at the beginning of the school year and be held daily if possible until the end of the year rather than being started near the end of the year and lasting only a brief time.
4. Each of the three types of meetings (social problem-solving, open-ended, and educational-diagnostic) should be used rather than one type exclusively in order to allow for a full range of experiences for the students and teacher.
5. The pretest on the self-concept scale should be given at the very beginning of the year and the posttest at the very end. Thus, changes in self-concept which are frequently difficult to make will have more time to be realized and become apparent.

6. Once teacher and students have become fairly well acquainted at the beginning of school, measurement devices such as teacher-rating scales and peer-rating scales could be given and then re-administered near the end of the school to determine in what ways these dimensions of behavior might have changed.

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