



On Hispanic Education:

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Minority Language Student Self-esteem

Minority language (MIL) students in the U.S. have more at stake than majority language students in the efforts our schools put forth to develop a healthy self-esteem in their students. If schools do not respect a minority language student's language, ancestry, nationality, ethnicity, race, color, or any other cultural difference of importance to that student, that student's self-esteem may be negatively affected. If that student doesn't feel good about him or herself, she/he will lack pride in themselves and thereby also lack motivation to do well in school. Majority language students on the other hand don't usually face as much of a threat to their self-esteem due to cultural differences because the school already accepts their language and culture as normal and desirable.

Self-esteem comes about from an individual's personal assessment of their goodness, worthiness, or significance in the things they do, are or achieve (Hamachek, 1987). Whereas self-concept is what we **think** about ourselves, self-esteem is what we **feel** about ourselves. If we want students to reach their academic potential in our schools or their social potential in our society it is essential that they think and feel good about themselves. Negative feelings of self-worth can prevent individuals from reaching their potential or self-actualization. Abraham Maslow (1970) wrote that self-actualization was one of our basic human needs, but in the hierarchy of priority of needs, self-esteem came before self-actualization. In other words, without self-esteem, self-actualization may not be possible!

What can schools do then to help MIL students be less at-risk of developing poor self-esteem? Among the multitude of things that schools can do to develop a stronger self-esteem in all students, some things that may be of particular importance to minority language students fall into the following categories: a) language pluralism, b) a culturally pluralistic school climate, c) teacher skills, and d) disaggregated student achievement concerns. Let's discuss.

All threats to an MIL student's self-esteem due to their language difference should be eradicated in schools with MIL students. Such schools should therefore stress the desirability of maintaining the student's minority language as well as attaining English proficiency. This policy of language pluralism will immediately tell minority language students that their language difference is valued and prized. Although schools don't always have teachers that can speak a minority language student's language, efforts should be made to find tutors or any available community resources that can help develop greater proficiency and literacy in that student's language. In other words, schools should stress the retainment of a language other than English as a *modus operandi* for MIL students.

The school climate and environment should reflect both in appearance and practice a respect for majority as well as minority student culture, ancestry, heritage, and language. The employee profile in school should

reflect the diversity of composition of the student body to the greatest degree possible. Displays, exhibits, performances, guest speakers, etc., should reflect the cultural diversity of the school, community, state, and the nation. Ridicule, disparagement, or ostracization of a minority language student by students or personnel because MIL students speak differently, should be staunchly and sternly prohibited. Achievement of literacy in a language other than English should be frequently and demonstrably rewarded, praised, and encouraged just as much as academic achievement in other important subject areas. The climate of the school should definitely be culturally pluralistic.

Teacher and administrator skills and education must also be considered in protecting the self-esteem of MIL students. Either through preservice or inservice education, teachers and administrators should have a firm grounding in the influence and function of a negative self-esteem on student development, school achievement, absenteeism, disciplinary behavior, etc. Teachers need also to understand how MIL students, confronted by predominantly monocultural classrooms can develop negative self-esteem and how this can result in failure to achieve academically. Another area that teachers need to be informed about is sex differences in self-esteem levels—there are many times significant differences in self-esteem levels in favor of boys. Teachers need to come to the classroom prepared to implement teaching and learning strategies which research has shown to enhance student self-esteem, such as cooperative learning, individualized instruction, peer tutoring, teacher-pupil planning, student self-evaluation techniques, and applying the principles of affective education and not just focusing on the cognitive domain of learning.

In developing a strong self-esteem in minority language students, it is essential that schools disaggregate the achievement data on all their students. In other words, the school must distinguish whether achievement levels for students differ based on language, race, sex, socio-economic level, handicap status, national origin, etc. When there exist negative differences for MIL students, then the school must implement corrective strategies which can include evaluation of self-esteem among MIL students and evaluation of the school's effectiveness in the implementation of self-esteem enhancement learning and teaching activities with MIL students. Schools concerned with the self-esteem of MIL students will conduct activities aimed at enhancing self-perception and make sure that such activities permeate the instruction and curriculum. Such activities will include projects that encourage MIL students to think about themselves and develop feelings of belonging and self-worth. In doing so such schools will make sure that the self-esteem of minority language students in our schools is not at greater risk than that of majority language students.