

Self Concept



A student enters school as a unique individual, molded by genes, environment, and a certain spark within himself. An increased awareness of how special that unique spark really makes him helps that student retain that quality when the pressure is on to follow the pack. Included: Ten simple projects to help preserve individuality and promote self-esteem!

1. The Interview

This is a great beginning-of-the-year activity. I have students break into dyads. Each is paired with someone he does not already know well. Allowing five minutes per interview, the students interview each other. Then standing behind the person he has just interviewed, his hands on that person's shoulders, each child tells what he has learned about the other, introducing him to the class.

2. The Journal

As a journal entry each student might write a poem, describe a dream, or share something he is pleased about or unhappy about. It is the student's journal; I read an entry only if the student says I may. However, I do check regularly to ensure that there are at least three dated entries per week.

3. Designing Self-Collages

Using pictures, words, or symbols clipped from magazines that represent things they enjoy doing or own, places they've been, people they admire, or careers they desire, my students create a collage. They place their names on the back, and I post the collages around the room. I have the other students guess which collage belongs to whom and state why they made that guess.

4. Ranking Traits

I ask students to rip a piece of paper into ten strips. On each they write a word or phrase that describes themselves. I assure students that no one will see what they have written, so a student can be extremely honest. Then the student arranges the traits in order from what he most likes about himself to what he least likes. When done, I say, "Do you like what you see? Do you want to keep it? Now give up one trait. How does the lack of that affect you? Now give up another. Give up three. Now what kind of person are you?" After giving up six of the qualities, I have students regain the traits one by one. Frequently I see great tension as students decide which traits they will give up. I hear comments about how incomplete the student feels without those traits, and I see great relief, and a new understanding of the importance of those traits, as they are regained. After the session, I have students write in their journals what they kept and what they learned about themselves from the experience.

5. Accentuate the Positive

Breaking the class into groups of four to six, my students focus on one member at a time. I have all the students in the group tell all the positive things they can about that person. I encourage compliments that focus on behavior rather than something that cannot be altered or developed like a physical characteristic. No put downs are allowed. Every comment must be positive. One student acts as the recorder. This list is then given to the person for his journal.

6. Thumbprints

I have each student place his thumb on an inkpad and make a thumb print. Beforehand I photocopy the five general fingerprint patterns shown in the encyclopedia, so students can identify their type of print. I discuss the fact that each fingerprint is special because it is totally unique. Then each student creates an animal using the thumbprint as the body. The students place this in their journals.

7. Create a "Me" Commercial

I have each student write a two- to three-minute television commercial. The topic is why someone should hire him. The commercial depicts the student's special qualities. After they work on these, the students present their commercials in front of the class. Another variation is for a group of five to create a commercial for each one and then present this in front of the class.

8. Shared Learning

At the end of each quarter, after each student rereads his journal, the class sits in a circle and each student shares one thing he has learned about himself so far this year.

9. Write Yourself a Letter

At the end of the school year, I have students write themselves a letter. I tell them that no one but they will read this letter so they can say anything they want in it. However, a part of that letter might include who their friends are, their current height and weight, favorite movies and music, and special things both good and bad that occurred during the year. I encourage my students to also include a current picture. On another sheet of paper or the back of that sheet I ask my students to write ten goals they would like to accomplish by this time next year. Students seal this letter in an envelope, self-address it, and give it to me. In a year I mail the letters back to the students. (The directions are slightly different for my eighth-graders. I ask them to write ten goals they would like to accomplish by the end of the next four years. They seal these, self-address them, and give them to me. I mail those letters back to them when they are seniors in high school and once again ready to leave a school.)

10. Drawing Self Portraits

Using a small mirror, students draw themselves. My students use black or colored pencils, but any medium could be used. The picture does not have to be exact, but it should be representative of that student. These portraits also go into the journals. An optional variation is to divide the shape for the face down the center lengthwise. Half the face can be a depiction of how the student sees himself, and the other how he thinks others see him. This is accompanied by a journal entry that describes how the student sees himself versus how he thinks others see him.

These activities are just the tip of the iceberg. There are many other activities through which a teacher can help her students build a positive self-concept. These types of activities hopefully give students the strength to withstand the pressures of the pack; they hopefully enable students to resist that pull to metamorphoses into who they're not.

A student enters school as a unique individual, molded by genes, environment, and a certain spark within himself. An increased awareness of how special that unique spark really makes him helps that student retain that quality. My goal as a teacher is not to produce cookie-cutter children but to nourish each student's individual soul. As an ancient Chinese proverb says:

I hear ...and I forget
I see... and I remember
I do...and I understand.