

## **Susie Jans Thomas**

### **A Celebration of Self: Using Self-Esteem Portfolios to Reveal Self-Concept in College Students**

**Susie Jans-Thomas** is a professor of education at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She teaches courses related to curriculum development in the content areas of social studies. In addition to this she designs and teaches courses that involve using literature to teach controversy, including: Censorship in Education, Literature of the Holocaust, Women of the Holocaust, Holocaust Survivors' Stories, Women in History, The 1960's, and Bats, Balls, and Books: The Literature of Baseball. She has received recognition for her work in Holocaust Education and has attained grants to support her work in this area. She serves on the Holocaust Education Center of Milwaukee's advisory board. She is also the Book Editor for The Journal: The Wisconsin Council for the Social Studies journal. Dr. Jans-Thomas' work in self-esteem centers around the teaching of child and adolescent development; whereby, self-esteem parallels all areas of human development. The Self-Esteem Portfolio Project is the result of a research study that found that teachers who get to know their students as individuals improve academic achievement. She uses the Self-Esteem Portfolio Project in her classes to assist students in higher education to discover themselves, and increase personal interaction between professor and student.

---

Self-esteem is "one's judgment of one's own abilities, limits, and value" (Salkind, 1994). Throughout child and adolescent development self-esteem varies as life becomes more complex. Therefore, an integral part of education is to promote the personal development of a child so that a positive self-image will lead to a successful adult. Those who effectively work with children throughout the various stages of child development, recognize the need for allowing children and adolescents to explore their feelings so that they can become comfortable with the persons they are striving to be.

In elementary schools, children are asked to be the "Student of the Week" and share themselves with their peers. They speak freely of their favorite things, their strengths and weaknesses, their family, and their friends. They stand with pride as they answer questions their peers ask, and often provide photographs of events and family members. These children have a unique sense of self and accomplishment for people who have only been a part of the human race for seven to eleven years.

In middle schools and junior high schools, young adolescents do not demonstrate the ease to share of themselves. Developmentally it is known that they are not as egotistical as they were when they were younger, and therefore; they do not demonstrate the eagerness to share of themselves. Changes in physical appearance detract from the uninhibited nature of their being.

By the time adolescents enter high school, teachers no longer ask them to share of themselves for the curriculum is content driven, and they must meet academic standards. Those who teach English and poetry classes sometimes catch a glimpse into the developing self, but all too often the individual student does not display his unique individuality. Adolescents mistrust adult intentions, and choose to share of themselves with only an intimate inner circle of peers.

Individuals who enter college learn their identifying numbers very quickly so that they can associate themselves with their academic achievement. Society says that the college years

can be the best years of one's life, but where does one go to discover the self? When lecture halls are crowded with streams of faces, few of whom professors ever engage in dialogue, how can students learn to know themselves as individuals? All too often undergraduate students become the individual their academic performance deems them to be, and in terms of the development of self, this can be disappointing.

### **What Is a Self-Esteem Portfolio?**

Self-Esteem Portfolios are an instructional strategy used to explore and examine self-concept in students on a variety of grade levels. Implementation of the strategy throughout the entire educative experience reflects the developmental theories of child and adolescent development, for "self-esteem becomes multidimensional and more complex with age as the child's self-concept develops" (McAfee & Leong, 1994).

The Self-Esteem Portfolio is a collection of a student's accomplishments reflective of predetermined objectives to enable the student to become a self-advocate. The teacher and student in a conference setting determine the objectives for the contents. As the student completes the stated objectives, further conferences are held to assist the student in becoming aware of successes and failures, and to identify the attributes that lead to each.

The contents of a Self-Esteem Portfolio encompass items that allow the student to exhibit pride in achievement. The entries are more than simply the things a child is "good at," or "likes," they are items that assist the child in becoming proud of himself as an individual. Through involvement of teachers and parents, children become aware of adult expectations for their future success. A Self-Esteem Portfolio can be thought of as a "Brag Book" to exhibit pride and achievements and assist teachers in recognizing students as individuals (Jans-Thomas, 1995).

Through the use of the Self-Esteem Portfolio a student can become a self-evaluator and develop reflective thinking practices. Conferencing with a professor is an important part of any portfolio implementation, and the Self-Esteem Portfolio process is designed to increase communication between the teacher and pupil. Conferencing provides the teacher with necessary anecdotal information to assess the student as an individual, and assists the student in creating an understanding of personal achievements.

### **Implementation on the College Level**

Originally the Self-Esteem Portfolio process was implemented with students from first grade through adult high school level. With the successful implementation came the realization that the process deserved a place on the higher education level. Establishment of the fact that self-esteem fluctuates throughout a person's life, an examination of undergraduate students was deemed appropriate in supporting the research findings. Therefore, the project was added to a Child and Adolescent Development course at Mount Mary College that is required for all students majoring in education. It was thought that by putting the Self-Esteem Portfolio Process in this course, the students would understand the developmental nature of self-esteem, learn a valuable teaching strategy, and grow to know themselves as individuals.

To facilitate the process the following themes were chosen: I Am Proud Of; What I Like About Myself; What Others Like About Me; An Activity I Enjoy; I Am an Expert In; I Solve a Difficult Problem By; I Would Like to Have Dinner with the Following People from History; and My Future Plans Are. Students wrote out the theme and responded to each by

describing their choice and why it was chosen. They were encouraged to include, photographs, drawing, poetry, and any other artifacts they felt represented the chosen response. The procedures were similar to the project conducted in the lower grades. Students were only required to meet with the professor once rather than for each theme, as was the procedure in the original study.

In addition to this adaptation, each student was required to present her portfolio at an event entitled: "Celebration of Self." Students were to invite someone from their lives to attend the celebration. The professor sent written invitations to all of the guests, members of the faculty, and college administration. Individuals presented their portfolios to the large group for five minutes. At the end of the presentations a reception was held.

### Pride

Pride is an interesting concept in that most people do not enjoy calling attention to personal achievement and beliefs, yet pride is a human emotion that is developmental. Pride in accomplishments allows an individual to define herself, thereby, making it an integral part of a person's identity. Mount Mary College is a women's college, and gender came into play in this theme. Many of the women involved in the classes felt that they had been conditioned by cultural mores never to brag or boast about themselves. They equated exhibition of pride as bragging. Their response was very different from the first graders involved in the initial project that would share all of their personal achievements when given the opportunity. One third grader in the initial study was proud of "Myself" (herself). When asked why she responded, "I can play with my cat." Taking care of her cat demonstrated that she was able to nurture another creature. When the undergraduate students responded to the theme the majority of responses centered on their ability to go to school, work part time, and maintain some form of a personal life.

The professor learned that when it comes to pride, students who can juggle all of these demands truly have something for which they can be proud. Conferences with individual students showed that the students had not felt the need to feel proud for quite some time. This awareness of demands placed on students enlightened the professor to assist the students with time management strategies, study skills, and encouragement for their endeavors. Encouraging students to develop a personal identity became an important part of the professor's philosophy.

### What I Like About Myself

The theme, "What I Like About Myself" caused yet another disturbance for the undergraduates working on their Self-Esteem Portfolios. As women, they were quick to point out that advertisements have taught them that they should change everything about themselves that they possibly can, from the soup they eat to the color of their hair. The conferences with the professor assisted them in uncovering the fact that they are organized, good friends, thoughtful people, good mothers, talented musicians, and overall kind people. These ideas were things that they had not thought about as they rushed through their days meeting deadlines.

Their behavior was unlike the sixth grader involved in the initial study that said that she liked the fact that she was "neat, organized, funny, and nice." Or another who said she liked her sense of humor because it "makes people feel better." It was evident to the professor that liking oneself had almost vanished in the world of higher education undergraduate school. The students were so intent on making grades that they had almost

forgotten their inner selves. Through conferencing the students learned that there are many characteristics that allowed them to feel unique.

### What Others Like About Me

The topic that met with the most resistance was "What Others Like About Me." Individual undergraduate students found it difficult to ask another person about herself. It was during a debate on this theme with a student that the professor decided to contact personal friends, colleagues, and family to see what they thought of her. The professor E-mailed everyone in her personal address book and asked what characteristics were liked about her. Within a day, there were responses in her electronic mailbox from people near and far. The Self-Esteem Portfolio had now fallen into another population, that of the professorate. The idea of E-mailing friends was suggested to the students and it can be concluded that the majority have chosen this method to complete this theme of the project.

Receiving E-mail about oneself was a delightful experience for the majority of the students involved in the project. Many have stated that they have received so many heartfelt messages from others that they have cried while reading them. It seems that society's need to rush through the day has found people with the inability to verbalize what they like about another individual, and in turn, the receiver of the feelings makes light of the message. Stopping to appreciate the characteristic individuality of another human being is a part of establishing meaningful relationships in life. The development of this area can find a person achieving contentment.

### I Am an Expert

The word "expert" has a connotation that says that no one can be better than me. Adults are apprehensive about saying they are an expert in anything when they have not won an award, or invented something new for the world. However, children involved in the project were quick to respond to this area. They appear to have an innate sense of accomplishment and are fearless with such responses as "making my friends laugh," or "swimming," or "riding my bike." They view being an expert as being able to do something well. It can be argued that adults understand the definition of "expert" with slightly more finesse; however, the finesse appears to take the enthusiasm out of the response. Conferences with the professor regarding the theme "I Am an Expert In" focused upon students growing to understand that an expert at something can exist within any group of people. For example, if one is involved in a group project the group seeks each individual's strengths to contribute to the overall product. Therefore, each member of the group becomes an expert for the group.

Once the students realized that they did not need to have won a Nobel Prize to be an expert in something their true identities began to show. The students shared of themselves that they were experts in sewing, parenting, managing a family, helping others, easing the stress of others, and one student even shared that she was an expert in "cleaning the bathroom." This response showed that the student not only had a grand sense of humor, but also showed that she was a contributing member to her family. Another example of "expertise" that deserves mention was when a student reported that she was an expert in "making complete meals out of leftovers." Her mother burst into immediate applause. The guests who attended the Celebration of Self truly loved the people who were presenting, and many had not been invited to school events since elementary school. Their presence reaffirmed each student's choices.

A topic enjoyed by the majority was, "I Would Like to Have Dinner With the Following People from History." Many were also enrolled in a history course and wanted to meet some of the people about whom they were reading. This theme had not been used in the initial project, but was viewed as important for those in young adulthood who were trying to pave the way into life. Interestingly many of the students talked about grandparents they had never met but had heard so much about during holiday meals. A dry eye could not be found at one of the Celebrations, when women shared that she would just like to be with her daughter who had died. Some wanted to meet scientists to ask additional questions that time did not seem to allow the scientists to answer. All of the responses demonstrated the need for sharing of one with others so that their will always be a place for memory.

The conferences with the professor found the students often turning the question to her for a response. These dialogues lead the professor to discover that she should create her own Self-Esteem Portfolio to use an instructional tool. The work of the theme "What Others Like About Me" was already completed, and she had discussed the other themes many times before with students of all ages. It was only fair that the one who had designed the assignment should complete it. The process turned into an awakening of self-fulfillment and integrity. It was during this process that the professor realized that Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial behavior were effectively demonstrated using this project.

Upon reexamination of the initial project data, the children sought their independence and wanted to identify themselves within prescribed groups. The undergraduate students from Child and Adolescent Development class were in search of relationships whether it be love, employment, or family. However, it should be noted that many of the students were not of traditional college age, and this variable demonstrated that in adulthood people share themselves with others in a variety of ways. This population demonstrated that a person is able to redefine herself by making a career change in midlife and returning to school to meet the requirements for the goal. The professor learned from her students that there is gratification in knowing that teaching is never a self-centered activity.

### My Future

The theme that has demonstrated a great deal of change over the time the Celebration of Self has been conducted is "My Future Plans Are." In the beginning many students said they wanted a teaching job, a sports car, and time to travel. Currently the students talk of marriage, family, and becoming grandparents. This change could be attributed to a variety of influences. September 11, 2001 has clearly shown the world how quickly life can be fractured. Perhaps the slowing down of the economy has caused students to truthfully examine the choices they have made. One could infer that the professor has developed better conferencing skills so that the students are questioned to more critically examine their choices. However, it should also be recognized that the component of "What Others Like About Me" has been strengthened by the "impersonal nature" of e-mail. The responses that students are receiving from others are very honest, and it is perhaps this that has the individuals pausing to examine where life might take them. The response from others seems to affirm individual identity, and no one wants to think of being alone in the future.

### Celebration of Self

The guests who attend the Celebration of Self commented about how much they enjoyed the fact that their loved ones were able to stand up in front of a group and talk about themselves. Spouses, parents, and friends exhibited a sense of pride as they talk with other

guests after the presentations. Everyone examined the Self-Esteem Portfolios of each student carefully, sharing the characteristics that made the individual unique. Some of the mothers sent the professor thank you notes for having been invited. Some of the fathers held their grandchildren while their daughters shared more stories of themselves. Some of the spouses were amazed that their mate had difficulty knowing what strengths she had that others have grown to rely on so much. Other members of the faculty implemented the aspects of the projects in their classes after attending the Celebration of Self, and others were amazed that some of their students were such wonderful people.

Perhaps one of the best ways to share the experience with the reader is to tell the story of the event that took place during a summer school session. The Celebration of Self was to begin at 7:00 p.m. A group of students with their extended families, made up of parents, grandparents, children, dogs, nieces and nephews, brought a grill and a mobile home to the center of the campus and had a picnic prior to the event. The guests learned about those with whom their loved ones were attending school, experienced stories about their loved ones as students, and beamed with pride as they came to know another aspect of a treasured person. The bond they had created made the individual presentations less stressful for the students because the room had fewer unfamiliar faces.

The students enrolled in Child and Adolescent Development hope to be teachers upon completion of their educational experience at Mount Mary College. The Self-Esteem Portfolio Process along with their individual presentation at the Celebration of Self was just one of many requirements necessary to meet their goal. It is hoped that this project will become a teaching tool for them to use with their future students. They may not use all aspects of the project. However, if they have learned that simply talking to students about them as individuals rather than simply judging them as students who can or cannot "do" math, the future for many children will be one that is truly full of happiness, for they will know that to understand you is to understand others.

## References

Goldstein, T. (1995). Interviewing in a Multicultural/Multilingual Setting. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(3), 587-93.

Hamachek, D. (1995). Self-Concept and School Achievement: Interaction Dynamics and a Tool for Assessing the Self-Concept Component, *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 73(4), 419-25.

Jans-Thomas, S. J. (1996). *Self-Esteem Portfolios: A Study Involving Alternative Assessment Practices to Improve Student Self-Concept and Achievement*. Milwaukee: Mount Mary College.

McAfee, O. & Leong, D. (1994). *Assessing and Guiding Young Children's Development and Learning*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Pike, K., & Salend, S. J. (1995). Authentic Assessment Strategies: Alternatives to Norm-Referenced Testing. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 28(1), 15-20.