

The Impact of Identity on Children's Self-Confidence and the Role of Differentiated Teaching

Children's development is deeply influenced by how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. During the early years of education, identity formation plays a vital role in shaping a child's self-confidence and self-esteem. Two key aspects of identity-gender and cultural background-can significantly affect a child's sense of belonging, competence, and value within a learning environment. As educators, understanding and acknowledging these factors is essential in fostering inclusive and supportive learning spaces. One effective strategy to counter potential negative effects of identity-based challenges is differentiated teaching, which allows each child's unique needs, strengths, and learning styles to be recognised and supported.

Gender and Its Impact on Self-Confidence

Gender norms and expectations begin to shape children's behaviours and self-perceptions from a very young age. According to Dweck (2006), children often internalise gendered beliefs about intelligence and ability. For instance, girls may be socialised to value compliance and neatness, while boys may be encouraged to take risks and be assertive. These stereotypes can influence classroom participation, subject preferences, and ultimately, self-esteem. In particular, research shows that by primary school age, girls may already begin to doubt their abilities in subjects like mathematics and science, despite performing just as well as their male peers (OECD, 2015).

If a classroom environment reinforces these stereotypes-consciously or unconsciously-children may feel pressured to conform, limiting their willingness to explore and take academic risks. For example, a boy who enjoys creative writing might shy away from expressing himself due to fear of judgment, or a girl passionate about robotics may feel isolated in a male-dominated group. Over time, such dynamics can erode self-confidence and prevent children from realising their full potential.

Cultural Background and Self-Esteem

Similarly, a child's cultural background can deeply affect how they see themselves within a learning community. Children from minority or marginalised ethnic backgrounds may experience feelings of

exclusion if their culture is not represented or respected in the classroom. As Ladson-Billings (1995) argues in her work on culturally relevant pedagogy, when students' cultural identities are ignored or devalued, they may feel alienated from the school system. This alienation can manifest as low participation, behavioural issues, or reluctance to engage with learning.

For example, a child whose first language is not English may struggle not only with language barriers but also with a sense of "otherness" if their home language and traditions are not acknowledged. Without affirmation of their identity, these children may start to perceive themselves as less capable or less valued, leading to diminished self-esteem.

The Role of Differentiated Teaching

Differentiated teaching involves adapting instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners-whether based on ability, learning style, interest, or background. When done thoughtfully, this approach can significantly enhance a child's self-confidence by validating their individuality and providing them with accessible entry points to learning.

By recognising that every child learns differently, educators can design lessons that incorporate multiple modes of representation-visual, auditory, kinesthetic-as well as offer choices in how students demonstrate their understanding. This flexibility allows students to use their strengths and develop their weaknesses in a supportive environment. Tomlinson (2014) emphasises that differentiation is not simply about varying tasks, but about maintaining high expectations while providing appropriate support and challenge.

Importantly, differentiation also involves cultural and gender inclusivity. For instance, using diverse texts that reflect a range of cultural experiences or highlighting achievements of both male and female role models in various subjects can validate students' identities and inspire confidence. Teachers who intentionally create safe spaces for all voices to be heard-through discussion, collaboration, and celebration of difference-help foster a strong sense of belonging.

Conclusion

A child's self-confidence and self-esteem are intricately linked to their identity, including gender and

cultural background. When these aspects are overlooked or marginalised in educational settings, children may struggle to see themselves as capable learners. However, through the intentional use of differentiated teaching, educators can create equitable and empowering learning experiences. By acknowledging and respecting each child's identity, and tailoring instruction to support individual needs, we not only enhance academic outcomes but also nurture confident, resilient learners who believe in their own potential.

References:

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