Upon observing children from age four to age eleven, I am amazed at seeing such a difference in their self-concept, identity and motivation. Children start out very confident and uninhibited when they are in prekindergarten through second grade. As I walked into the classrooms, they readily invited me to come and see what they were doing; they wanted to be seen. After the second grade, and especially by the fourth or fifth grade, I observed much the opposite: “Don’t look at me.” When I interviewed an eleven year-old boy, he elaborated on the nuances I was able to observe in the fifth grade classrooms. While he was confident about himself academically, he voiced on three occasions how he felt when he got something wrong after volunteering an answer in class. He said he would feel himself blushing and would feel humiliated. Later, he said that it was a “choking” feeling when he could not think because he was “still reeling” that he had gotten it wrong. He said that was when he needed for the teacher to move on to someone else. At this very sensitive age, middle age children need to have teachers who understand that their limbic system kicks in when they are emotionally affected, and they are unable to make a logical or rational decision. Furthermore, teachers need to recognize that children who are emotionally charged need help getting uncharged before they can rationalize their thoughts or actions. Teachers need to be sure that they shift the attention away from a child who is feeling emotional to let that child regroup emotionally while still preserving his or her dignity. This project has led me to realize that my perception of a child’s needs in a classroom were misplaced: I have always thought that the most nurturing teachers were best suited for prekindergarten through second grade, but I now see that nurturing is especially important to students of all ages, especially during the time that we start losing the child’s interest in school due to feeling unconfident, not understood, and incapable of achieving.

Moreover, self-concept affects motivation. Teachers need to be able to identify when a student is not participating because he or she feels incapable of succeeding in the task. The feeling of not being able to do it well can negatively impact the motivation of a child: a child can feel “dumb” because he or she cannot do something right, and this can lead to a feeling of failure and noncompliance with the teacher. Near the end of my interview, I asked my interviewee what his favorite physical feature of himself was. He struggled to answer. The tension, which can be observed in the video, is evident of the struggle middle-aged children feel about their body image and is humbling to see as a parent of a middle school child.

Overall, it is our duty as educators to continue to uplift our students and make them feel valued, respected and capable. As children get older, we need to understand and accept the inferiorities that they feel at this sensitive age. We must provide an environment where they feel safe, secure and supported. What I learned most from my interviewee is that even an academically successful student may appear confident outwardly, this is only a fragile façade that can be shattered, or at least slowly chipped away, by an unknowing teacher, who is unfamiliar with the reassuring needs of the middle-aged children.