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MELINDA R. PIERSON, PH.D.*
California State University

Self-Concept in the United States: History and Definitional Models

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Self-concept has been an important theoretical construct for children and especially for children with mild/moderate disabilities in the history of special education. This chapter will review the role that self-concept has played in the field of special education and how it has impacted children in the history of schooling in the United States. Definitional models of self-concept will be presented and analyzed in light of the impact of the social outcomes on academic/cognitive progress.

KEY WORDS: self-concept, special education.

Importance of Self-Concept in the History of Special Education

Throughout the history of special education, those concerned with children with learning problems have not focused solely on cognitive outcomes, but have expressed concerns regarding affective and social outcomes as well. In the early 20th Century, students

* Professor and Chair, Department of Special Education, College of Education, California State University, Fullerton United States.

with academic weaknesses were removed from the regular classroom and enrolled in ungraded classes to prevent continued failure in both academic achievement and social situations in the belief that these failure experiences had consequences for children, particularly in the way they viewed themselves. The idea that students would benefit from academic successes in ungraded classes also led to the belief that they would then feel better about themselves; thus, their self-esteem would be improved.

Likewise, the efficacy studies conducted in the 1950s and early 1960s focused on academic achievement and social and personal adjustment (Guskin & Spicker 1968). Sociometric techniques revealed that students with cognitive deficits benefited socially in self-contained classrooms because their low social skills resulted in rejection and neglect by peers in regular classes. In several studies, it was determined that students with low IQs enrolled in regular classes were seldom selected as friends by nondisabled peers (Johnson 1950; Johnson & Kirk 1950).

However, concern over the possible negative impact of labeling and segregation of students on the basis of their cognitive abilities has moved educators toward the current trend of mainstreaming. Gottlieb captured the anticipated social benefits of mainstreaming with the term "the contact hypothesis" (Gottlieb 1981), which predicts that increased interaction between disabled and nondisabled children will prove to

nondisabled students that there is nothing to fear from students with disabilities and that through contact with them, nondisabled students will learn that they (i.e., those with low cognitive skills) are just as likable as nondisabled children. Increased contact was also anticipated to result in increased acceptance of students with disabilities. Unfortunately, Gottlieb's (1981) review of research on the impact of mainstreaming led him to conclude the exact opposite. The more the nondisabled children became familiar with disabled children, the less accepting the nondisabled were of the children with mental retardation.

Originally, the three anticipated beneficial outcomes of mainstreaming articulated by Gottlieb included the following: increased peer acceptance and decreased peer rejection, positive social interactions between disabled and nondisabled children, and the modeling of appropriate social behaviors of nondisabled children by disabled children. All of these outcomes are directly related to a child's self--concept which again illustrates the importance that self-concept has had throughout the history of special education when placements have been evaluated in terms of whether the child feels better about himself/herself. However, the benefits anticipated by proponents of mainstreaming have not been realized (Gresham 1982).

A meta-analysis by Chapman (1988) revealed that mainstreamed settings did not lead to higher self-concepts for students with learning disabilities. Students with academic handicaps are often rejected or otherwise negatively evaluated by their nonhandicapped peers in regular classes. Chapman also argued that the academic self-concept of students with educational handicaps suffered due to the competitiveness of the regular classroom. The meta-analysis on self-concept of LD students contrasted the effect of differing educational settings on self-concept. The author reported that effect sizes ranged for LD students in mainstreamed settings from .05 to –1.48, in contrast to the effect size for LD students in segregated settings which ranged from –.30 to –1.08. These findings show that LD students had relatively lower self-concept scores when mainstreamed in comparison with the self-concept scores found for LD students in segregated class placements. Chapman also emphasized that negative comparisons made by the teachers and peers of students with educational handicaps are factors that contributed to a lowered self-concept for students with disabilities.

Another service delivery model that has caught the attention of many educators recently is full inclusion. In its more extreme form, advocates for this model argue that general education classes are the best place to educate *all* students. The anticipated benefits mentioned by proponents of full inclusion are primarily, if not exclusively in the areas of peer acceptance, self-concept, and social skills

(Fuchs & Fuchs 1994; MacMillan, Gresham & Forness 1996). Full inclusion does not involve students with mild disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs 1994); rather, it is advocated on behalf of those with more severe disabling conditions.

Despite the many changes in the way that children with disabilities have been educated, one outcome that has been continually mentioned as an important consideration has been the impact of the placement/treatment on self-concept. Self-concept has been defined as "a person's perception of himself" (Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton 1976, p. 411). These perceptions are influenced by significant others as well as specific experiences in one's environment. "One's perceptions of himself are thought to influence the ways in which he perceives himself" (Shavelson et al. 1976, p. 411).

Definitional Models of Self-Concept

Strein (1993) has described four distinct models of self-concept that have been detailed in the literature. These represent different ways of conceptualizing self-concept which, in turn, have implications for educational interventions. The four models will be described and scales for assessing self-concept associated with each of these models will be identified.

Nomothetic Model

From this perspective, self-concept is conceptualized as unidimensional. One's behavior is affected by a global positive or negative view of one's self in varying situations. Individual self-perceptions are not separated into separate domains in the nomothetic approach, but rather under a single general factor. Because it is unidimensional, the nomothetic model postulates that a generalized view of one's self leads to behavior in a wide variety of domains including school performance and achievement. Therefore, it does

not contain a specifically defined academic self-concept or any other subscales (Strein 1993).

Two instruments yield one global rating in self-concept and operationalize this view: *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (Rosenberg 1965) and the original version of the *Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale* (Piers 1969). The fact that over 100 research articles published between 1983 and 1988 used the Rosenburg scale as the primary measure of self-concept demonstrates that one global rating of self-concept is, or was, a widely held view (Strein, Cain, Edelman & Schwalb 1989). The original Piers-Harris was reported to be "… the most widely used and highly recommended self-concept instrument for children" (Marsh & Holmes 1990, p. 91).

Changes in global self-concept would have generalized effects on behavior in a wide variety of domains. One could assume that success in one domain will positively affect global self-concept which would then affect behavior positively in another area. Therefore, the nomothetic model supports such interventions as self-concept enhancement curricula, individual counseling, and involvement in extracurricular activities as a vehicle to success in school. For instance, if success occurs in one area, general self-concept will improve which enhances behavior in all areas because of the importance this view holds for global self-concept (Strein 1993).

Hierarchial Model

This model stresses a multidimensional view of self-concept. It is typically represented schematically as a pyramid with general self-concept at the apex, academic self-concept and nonacademic self-concept (subsumes self-concept of physical skills such as peer relationships and physical appearance) at the middle level, and specific sub-domains (e.g., English self-concept, math self-concept, and nonacademic behavior) underneath the intermediate level (Strein 1993). Strein noted that a critical and consistent finding within the

hierarchial model is that academic grades in specific subject areas are more highly related to self-concept in their respective areas than they are to other areas of self-concept. For example, the following correlations were found: math grades versus math self-concept, .60; math grades versus English self-concept, .11. The specific components of this model may vary among theorists, but the basic form is the same.

The hierarchial model has been tested in many ways and has a solid base of research to support it. The structure of the model appears to be consistent across gender and cultures including the U.S., Canada and Australia. However, in this model, the specific self-concept dimensions become less related to one another as the child's age increases (Byrne & Shavelson 1986); that is, it becomes more differentiated.

Subject-specific self-concept can be differentiated from grades in corresponding subjects. This has been shown in studies using different academic self-concept measures (Byrne & Shavelson 1986) or student and teacher ratings of academic self-concept (Marsh, Parker & Smith 1983). A critical and consistent finding within the hierarchial model is that academic grades in specific subject areas are more highly related to self-concept in their respective areas than they are to other self-concept areas (Strein 1993).

A study by Byrne and Shavelson (1986) used an 11th- and 12th--grade sample and found the following correlations: English grades versus English self-concept, .44; English grades versus math self--concept, .24; math grades versus math self-concept, .60; math grades versus English self-concept, .11. Based on this example, the hierarchial model postulates an indirect effect of academic achievement on global self-concept, proceeding through academic self-concept.

Certain educational interventions are consistent with the model which focuses on domain specific interventions (Craven, Marsh & Debus 1991). First, children given feedback in small groups by researchers showed changes in academic self-concept, while children given similar feedback by their classroom teachers showed no such changes. Second, changes in academic self-concept were unrelated

to changes in measured achievement. Third, interpersonal interactions may have been the most salient feature of the intervention because the largest change was in peer self-concept. The intervention was only eight weeks long and did not include any skill--training in math or reading (Strein 1993). This differs sharply with interventions from the nomothetic model and also demonstrates the need for further research in the area of interventions using the hierarchial model of self-concept.

Taxonomic Model

The taxonomic model is closely related to the hierarchial model. It postulates a multidimensional view of self-concept as well. However, the various components are not as closely related to one another as is expected in the hierarchial model (Strein 1993).

A study using a clustering of self-perceptions that included a "school self" cluster among others was consistent with the taxonomic model because the clusters were relatively independent (Soares & Soares 1982, 1983).

The implications for educational interventions are similar to those of the hierarchial model. The only difference would be that a change in a self-concept domain would not necessarily lead to any changes in another domain because they are not interrelated (Strein 1993).

Compensatory Model

This model is also multifaceted, although it allows for relationships between facets. The compensatory model has been utilized more often for students with disabilities and some believe that it best explains their self-concept (Strein 1993). For instance, if a student is an excellent athlete, he may not feel so poorly about himself if he does not succeed academically because of a reading deficit.

Therefore, it is postulated in this model that success in one area compensates for failures in another.

This model has been based on the fact that the nonacademic self--concept of disabled and nondisabled children rarely differs as markedly as do the academic self-concept. Nevertheless, many researchers have argued against this model raising the following points: (a) the self-concept components would be inversely related to one another creating negative correlations and the literature has not demonstrated this; (b) the idea that the academic self-concept of students with learning problems are not affected has not been supported and; (c) a better explanation for weaknesses in specific areas is that people tend to underestimate their own problems (Strein 1993). Overall, based on the compensatory model's lack of supportive research, discussing educational interventions does not seem merited.

A definitional summary of self-concept is that most theoreticians agree that it is multifaceted (multidimensional), becomes increasingly differentiated with age, and there is some debate over whether or not it is hierarchial in its organization. Continued research in the area of self-concept will lead to improved interventions for children in both home and educational settings.

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Samoświadomość w Stanach Zjednoczonych: historia i definicje

Streszczenie

Samoocena jest konstruktem teoretycznym ważnym dla rozwoju dzieci, a zwłaszcza dla dzieci z lekką i umiarkowaną niepełnosprawnością w historii edukacji specjalnej. Artykuł ten prezentuje poglądy na temat roli, jaką odgrywa samoocena w dziedzinie kształcenia specjalnego i jak wpłynęła na dzieci w historii edukacji w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Definicyjne modele samooceny będą prezentowane i analizowane w świetle wpływu skutków społecznych na rozwój poznawczy.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: samoocena, niepełnosprawność intelektualna, edukacja, Stany Zjednoczone