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AUTHOR Obiakor, Festus
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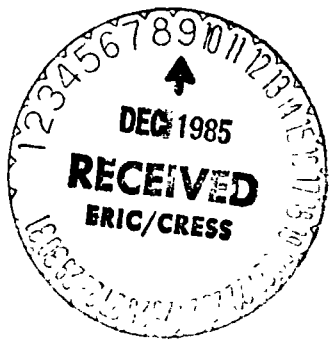
ABSTRACT

This document begins by discussing the important role self-concept plays in a student's academic achievement, social adjustment, and physical capability. A perceptual notion of self-concept is defined as awareness through senses. An operational notion of self-concept is defined as self-descriptive behaviors. Literature is reviewed which defines self-concept and concludes that measurement of different definitions are difficult to perform. Self-concept is then defined as the individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behavior including self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-ideal which can be measured by physical maturity, peer relations, academic success, and school adaptiveness. The literature on a perceptual model of self-concept and on the operational model are reviewed. Empirical studies on the relationship of self-concept and performance are discussed. References are included. (ABL)

Self-Concept: An Operational Model for Educators



Festus Obiakor, M.A.

Department of Special Education

New Mexico State University

Las Cruces, NM 88003

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Abstract

Self-concept is an important educational phenomenon. Educators have viewed it from different dimensions. Traditionally, self-concept is defined as undifferentated and highly inter ' perceptions of the self. Operationally, self-concept is an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors. From this perspective, self-concept is discreet, independent, observable, describeable, measurable, quantifiable, and area-specific in nature. An operational and functional self-concept focuses on the student's classroom behavior rather than his home background or non-school-related tasks. It appears, then, that to better deal with the "individual" child's academic success in the classroom, the operational model of self-concept is more useful. This paper vividly presents self-concept from an operational perspective while touching on the traditional model of self-concept. Different studies that have used the Self-Descriptive Inventory (SDI) are also presented.

Introduction

Several issues have emerged regarding the role of self-concept in a student's academic achievement, social adjustment and physical capability. The importance of self-concept cannot be underestimated. Countless educational programs have the goal of enhancing the child's self-concept. Educators with the perceptual or operational views have all agreed that self-concept is an important educational phenomenon. However, they have divergent views on the definitions of self-concept and instruments used for measuring it. This divergency has led to the proliferation of measurement tools, which result in inconsistent constructs and interpretations.

The "individual" student is the major focus in the classroom, and an operational or functional self-concept addresses the student's self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-ideal as they relate to classroom situations. Therefore, rather than focus on positiveness of self-concept as traditionally perceived, focus is on self-concept that is functional and educationally-oriented. Muller (1978) stated that a functional self-concept allows the student to more efficiently deal with his decision making and provide a basis for self-directed change. According to Muller, Chambliss and Muller (1983), in order for the self-concept to be functional:

1. Self-knowledge should accurately reflect the characteristics of the individual, being neither unrealistically positive nor negative.
2. Self-knowledge should be based upon self-observed supportive evidence and reflective of self-change.
3. Self-knowledge should be self-acceptive in tone and associated with a generally self-accepting self-esteem.
4. Self-ideal should be realistic and generally congruent with self-knowledge.

5. Self-concept should be used in decision-making.
6. Self-concept should be used to initiate and moderate self-directed change. (p. 23)

This paper focuses on (a) definition of perceptional and operational notions, (b) definition of self-concept, (c) structure of self-concept, (d) perceptual model of self-concept, (e) operational model of self-concept, and (f) empirical studies that reflect the operational model.

"Perceptual" and "Operational" Notions

Perceptual notion - The construct "perceptual" is derived from perception. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines perception as any insight, intuition, or knowledge gained by perceiving or becoming aware of directly through any of the senses, especially to see or hear. Such an awareness is frequently not supported by any scientific, empirical or research proofs; it is based on what the people want to hear or what is in vogue in a particular society. For instance, the assumption that the blind and other handicapped children have "low" self-concepts is based on perception. In special education today, perceptions have led to unwarranted generalizations and labels.

Operational notion - The construct "operational" pertains to an operation or a series of operations. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines "operation" as the state of being operative or functioning." In dealing with special children, functional terms, definitions and instruments have shown more clarity. For instance, the definition of self-concept as an individual repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors and the use of related area-specific instruments make interpretations easier. As a consequence, the teacher focuses more attention on helping the child to learn, and less attention on the general life of the child. The way the child functions in the classroom

becomes a primary concern of the teacher, and not how he or she is perceived by that teacher.

Definition of Self-Concept

Self-concept has been frequently cited as a formidable and significant variable in human behavior (Lecky, 1945: Purkey, 1970: Rogers, 1951; Snygg & Combs, 1949). Many authors (Canfield & Wells, 1976; Labenne & Greene, 1969; McDavid & Garwood, 1978) defined self-concept from the traditional "global" perspective, that is, as a highly interrelated set of perceptions of the self. For instance, McDavid and Garwood (1978) stated that, "self-concept is a particular set of attitudes and beliefs, values, and actions, all integrated into organized and consistent behavior with the person" (p. 453). McDavid and Garwood argued that self-concept cuts across all facets of experience and action. Self-concept ties together the variety of specific habits, abilities, outlooks, beliefs and values that a person displays. It is apparent that these explanations show self-perceptions which render the measurement of self-concept difficult, since measurement operations are not directly specified in the definition (Muller, Chambliss & Muller, 1983; Piers-Harris, 1964).

Muller (1978) defined self-concept as the individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behavior which includes self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-ideal. Muller and Leonetti (1974) and Shavelson, Bolus and Keasling (1980) argued that self-concept is a set of discreetly different, independent, possibly hierarchical factors or areas. It is measurable, area-specific, quantifiable and exposes operational clarity. The definition is also directly specified in the measurement tool (Muller, Chambliss & Muller, 1983).

Structure of Self-Concept

Self-concept has been defined as a highly interrelated set of perceptions

of the self (Kinch, 1983; Labenne & Greene, 1969). However, this definition renders the measurement of self-concept difficult since measurement operations are not directly specified in the definition (Muller, Chambliss & Muller, 1983). In the present paper, self-concept is basically defined as the individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors. Such self-descriptions can be accurate or inaccurate, consistent or contradictory, extensive or limited, covert or overt, and sometimes changes as the context changes. Self-concept includes self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-ideal, and can be measured in relationship to physical maturity, peer relations, academic success and school adaptiveness.

Self-knowledge - Self-knowledge is a subset of self-descriptive behaviors which describe the individual's characteristics or qualities. This includes descriptions of physical appearance, behavior, abilities, cognitive patterns, to mention but a few. Self-knowledge includes self-descriptions which indicate an evaluation of characteristics but does not include statements which indicate self-valuations. A sample statement is, "I am smart."

Self-esteem - Self-esteem is the subset of self-descriptive behaviors which indicate self-valuations. In this instance, the individual evaluates certain self-characteristics relative to how he values those characteristics. A sample statement is, "I like my being a hard worker."

Self-ideal - Self-ideal is the subset of self-descriptive behaviors that indicate self-qualities which the student desires to achieve or maintain through the expenditure of personal efforts. A sample statement is "I will endeavor to do good research studies."

Physical maturity - The relative maturity of the child within his classroom group. A more physically mature child in this test is one who looks older, is taller, or is stronger than his classmates.

Peer relations - The child's acceptance or rejection by his peer group.

The accepted child is portrayed as being included in a variety of group activities or as having many friends. The rejected child is portrayed as being rejected, left-out or as not having many friends. The rejected child is never portrayed as a child who prefers to play alone.

Academic success - The child's relative success at academics within his classroom group. The more successful child is portrayed as a more able learner, one who knows the answers to teacher questions, doesn't need help from the teacher, and makes relatively few mistakes on his school work.

School adaptiveness - The child's ability to exhibit those behaviors typically expected within the classroom environment. The school adaptive child is the student who does his work during the designated time, works quietly when expected to and does not distract others inappropriately.

Perceptual Model of Self-Concept

Typically, self-concept has been conceptualized as an undifferentiated or highly interrelated set of perceptions of self. This perceptual phenomenon simply describes the way one sees or perceives himself. Canfield and Wells (1976) stated:

> By the time a child reaches school age his self-concept is well formed and his reactions to learning, to school failure and success and to physical, social and emotional climate of the classroom will be determined by the beliefs and attitudes he has about himself (p. 3).

The above explanation means that a change in self-concept is likely to affect a wide range of behaviors. When one aspect of self-concept is affected, the entire self-concept is affected. Canfield and Wells (1976) developed a "poker chip theory of learning" which states that a child with positive self-concept can afford to take more risks in learning. McDavid and Garwood (1978) added that " a person's self-concept organizes and directs behavior in many kinds of achievement situations" (p. 463). In other words, the quality of self-concept tends to be directly related to a variety of measures of personal competency.

The better the quality of self-concept, the more competent the person is in various types of endeavors.

With the above notions in perspective, the measurement of self-concept is made difficult because (a) the measurement operations are not directly specified in the definition, (b) the definitions lack specificity, and (c) the definitions fail to provide educators with adequate guidance in the development of instructional procedures for enhancing the self-concepts of students (Muller, 1978; Muller, Chambliss & Muller, 1983; Piers & Harris, 1964; Wylie, 1974).

Operational Model of Self-Concept

Helper (1955) and Muller (1978) attempted to approach self-concept from a more operational perspective. Helper (1955) defined self-concept as the product of highly complex verbal learning in which a wide array of symbolic responses is associated with one's identity symbols ("I" statements). Muller (1978) viewed self-concept as an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors. In his view, self-concept "is a set of behaviors rather than an internal process, state or quality" (p. 2). Muller, Chambliss and Muller (1983) contended that self-concept includes self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-ideal, and that it can be measured using the Self-Descriptive Inventory in the areas of physical maturity, peer relations, general academic progress and social adaptiveness.

According to the operational model, self-descriptive behaviors quantified in terms of positiveness should, when factor analyzed, yield a number of discrete, internally consistent factors. Empirical support for the factor specific nature of self-concept is found in the works of Chambliss, Muller, Hulnick and Wood (1977); Lane and Muller (1977); Larned and Muller (1979) and Sharp and Muller (1978).

The revised instrument (from the Primary Self-Concept Inventory), the Self-Descriptive Inventory (Muller, Larned & Leonetti, 1977), provides measures of self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-ideal reflective of physical maturity, peer relations, academic success and school adaptiveness. The verifications on the opertional model have several implications for educators (Muller, Chambliss & Muller, 1983). First, instructional aspects designed to alter self-concept can be focused on those aspects of self-concept directly relevant to the school. Second, intrusion into the personal or family aspects of student's life is reduced since the teacher focuses his or her attention to school-related matters. Third, the programs designed to impact on self-concept in one area (for example, peer relations) are not likely to impact on self-concept in other areas (for example, academic success).

Empirical Studies

It is easy to find in the literature the notion that raising the positiveness of self-concept of the learner will enhance his or her ability to gain from educational programs. While this notion is extremely popular, there is virtually little or no research evidence to support its validity (Muller, Chambliss & Muller, 1983, p. 13).

However, the extensive work done by Muller et al. (as seen below) has shone more light on the importance of self-concept. Lane and Muller (1977) identified sixty fifth-graders with low academic self-concepts and randomly assigned each to one of three research groups. They found that positiveness of self-concept was raised easily, but failed to indicate that such a change was associated with a change in the achievement-related behavior. In a laboratory setting, Sharp and Muller (1978) gave false aptitude test results to college students which led them to believe they were either extremely capable or

incapable of learning a foreign language. A control group received no information relative to ability. They found that simply raising the positiveness of self-concept may not result in enhanced school learnings. Also, they discovered that students who had their self-concepts lowered through supportive feedback learned faster than those who had their self-concepts lowered through judgmental presentation of negative information. Larned and Muller (1979) examined the positiveness of self-concept (self-knowledge and self-esteem) in students from grades 1-9. They assessed self-concept using the following four school-related areas: physical maturity, peer relations, academic success and school adaptiveness. They found that academic success and school adaptiveness declined across grades, while the areas representing the less formal aspects of the school experience (physical maturity and peer relations) remained constant. Another study by Velasco-Barraza and Muller (1982) confirmed the above results, using students from Chile, Mexico and the United States.

Mayhall (1981) examined the relationships between level of positiveness of reading self-knowledge, actual reading ability and what the child selected to read when instructed to pick something which was of appropriate difficulty. He discovered that students were frequently accurate in their self-knowledge or achievement. In other words, students were not using their self-concepts in academic decision-making. Frazier (1983) used the Self-Descriptive Inventory to investigate the relationship of received grade discrepancy to academic achievement and self-concept. He found that "an unrealistically low positiveness of self-knowledge might be expected to facilitate underestimation of a grade by a student" (p. 4).

The above investigations have shown that self-concept is and will continue to be an important phenomenon in present and future educational programs.

While the knowledge of what is "accurate" or "inaccurate" self-concept is not the panacea to solving all the child's social problems in the classroom, such a knowledge will enable the teacher to know how to realistically deal with his or her students.

From the studies cited above, the following discoveries were made:

1. The comparisons used control groups.
2. The normative samples of the measurement tools were not used.
3. The authors of the Self-Descriptive Inventory defined self-concept. Contrarily, self-concept was not defined in the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale and the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale.
4. It appears that the definitions are directly related to the measurement instrument. There is operational clarity.
5. The studies made self-concept a relevant educational concern.
6. The studies viewed self-concept from an operational perspective. There was a differentiation of the school related behaviors and non-school-related behaviors. This makes it easy to write an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) that entails specificity. The more specific the problem, the easier the solution.

Conclusion

The differentiated "operational" model of definition and instrumentation of self-concept best meets the needs of students. The measure of self-concept is identifiable and has objectively describeable characteristics. Muller, Chambliss and Muller (1983) have operationally argued that "it is not possible to assess the accuracy of the statement, 'I earn good grades in school'" (p. 9). Since self-concept may be affected by situational factors, measurement should take place in a context which is similar to the context which will be operating at

the time the estimate of self-concept is to be used.

It is important to note that most standardized instruments which utilize self-description qualify the observed self-descriptions in terms of positiveness. Those self-descriptions which reflect the social ideal of the dominant society are scored as positive and those which are at odds are scored as negative. Contrarily, self-concept scores which reflect simple positiveness appear to pose interpretative difficulties and do not provide adequate information for proper utilization of self-concept test results. In both short and long runs, the utility of an instrument is the primary concern of educators. The identification of school-related behaviors and the achievement of "functional" self-concept are critical goal-directed educational ingredients.

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About the author - Festus Obiakor

I am a Ph.D. candidate in Special Education at New Mexico State University. Presently, I am a Research Assistant in Black Programs and a Senior Peer Counselor in Special Students Services Program at New Mexico State University. I am also a member of Phi Delta Kappa, Council of Exceptional children and the National Association for the Visually Handicapped.