

Perceptions of Self-Competence in Head Start Children

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Introduction

Self-concept is one of the most widely discussed constructs in psychological and educational literature. Unfortunately, it is also poorly defined. There is no consensus among professionals about the exact nature and definition of self-concept. Terms such as self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-worth, self-image, and self-acceptance are often used interchangeably and inconsistently (William, 1995). Most definitions of self-concept link this construct to achievement. More recently, self-concept has been viewed as an educational outcome. Whether self-concept is viewed as an outcome variable or as a moderator variable that helps explain achievement outcomes, it is a critical variable in education and educational evaluation and research (Harter, Whitesell, & Jukin, 1998).

Research Questions

The present study was designed to meet the pressing needs of current knowledge base. It aimed to investigate the self-concept of Head Start children of Hispanic and Caucasian background. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

1. Is there a difference between the self-concept of Head start children and non-Head Start pre-school children?
2. Is there a difference between the self-concept of Head Start children of Hispanic background and Head Start children of Caucasian background?

Setting

The present study was conducted at a Head Start center located in the rural area of Connecticut. This year the Head Start center served 64 preschoolers of different racial backgrounds. Children from Hispanic background constituted the largest majority. Hispanic children also constitute 60% of the student body in public schools here. Some children at this center attend the half-day program and some attend the full day program.

Sample

The principal investigator in collaboration with Head Start staff selected 20 children of Hispanic background utilizing the non-proportional stratified sampling technique. As far as Caucasian children are concerned, they were all selected. The total number of Caucasian children was fourteen. We were able to receive informed parental consent for participation in the study for 12 Hispanic children and seven White children. The mean age of Hispanic children was 4.1 years. They were all born in the USA. They were all English speaking. Hispanic children who did not understand and/or speak English were not included in the study. The mean age of Caucasian children was 4.3 years. Majority of the children came from single parent families. They were all Connecticut born.

Instrumentation

The Joseph Pre-school and Primary Self-Concept Screening Test (JPPSST) was used to collect the needed data. It is an individually administered scale that uses a forced choice self-report format. It is suitable for use with both boys and girls. The JPPSST generates a global self-concept score based on five differentiated dimensions: 1. Significance; 2. Competence; 3. General Evaluative Contentment; 4. Virtue; & 5. Power. It was normed on 1245 children, mostly White, residing in rural, suburban, and urban areas of Illinois. The split half reliability of

the JPPSST that was estimated using Kuder-Richardson (20) ranges from .59 to .81 with a median correlation of .73. The construct and criterion related validity of the JPPSST was well established. The JPPSST has been widely used in research studies. It is a viable measure of affective development and social-emotional growth in pre-school and primary programs. It may be used as a predictor of academic success. The JPPSST has 15 items, is based on pictorial format, and takes about 10 minutes to administer (Joseph, 1979).

The JPPSST is one of the best tools for pre-school children (Gerken, 1985; Wylie 1989). There is dearth of instruments appropriate for measuring self-concepts in children of this young age (Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 1991).

Results

Analyses of data indicate that there is a significant difference in the self-concept of Head Start children and non-Head Start children of the JPPSST norm group. Further, qualitative analyses of Identity Reference Drawing (IRD) of the JPPSST indicate that 31% of Head Start children shaded their face drawing as compared to 8% of the norm group. Face shading usually suggests high levels of anxiety and may be seen in some very seriously disturbed children who possess very negative self-images. Twenty six percent of the Head Start children omitted two facial features in their face drawing as compared to 5% of the norm group. Twenty six percent of the Head Start children omitted three facial features in their face drawing as compared to 12% of the norm group. Eleven percent of the Head Start children omitted one facial feature in their drawing as compared to 17% of the norm group. Omissions of two or more facial features are more serious than the omission of any singular feature. Omissions are more likely to be seen in children who are shy, passive or withdrawn. In certain instances, an omission may reflect developmental delay or possible cognitive deficits. (Joseph, 1979). Perhaps, Head Start children

experience negative influences on self-concept because of economic hardship and its attendant family problems such as drug/alcohol abuse and domestic violence.

The difference between the self -concept of Head Start children of Hispanic background and Caucasian background is insignificant. Some investigators have stated that most minority children do not perceive themselves negatively but it is rather the Anglo-Saxon group that perceives these children in negative ways and so assumes that minority group children see themselves in the same light. (Carter, 1968).

Implications for Future Research and Classroom Practice

Findings of the study have a limited generalizability because of small sample size. There is a need to replicate this study with larger samples. There might be difference in the self-concept of Head Start children because of programmatic and geographical differences. There is need to involve several Head Start centers representing different geographical areas in the research endeavor.

There is need for teachers to attend to the social-emotional needs of young children. Bush administration's emphasis on "school readiness" and "reading" is fine as long as we do not underestimate the social-emotional aspect of development.

Despite caveats, this study is significant, it has looked at the perceptions of self-competence in Latino Head Start children. The social-emotional development and education of Latino children has been given due significance. There is lack of literature on the self-concept of Latino children, the fastest growing minority in the USA. The study also looked at the perceptions of self-concept in White Head Start children. Evidently, we are embracing the

confluence of cultures in the education of children. The healthy development and appropriate education of children coming from impoverished backgrounds is indeed an international/global issue.

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