The nature and enhancement of academic self-concept for students with learning difficulties

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Session Overview

• Importance of self-concept
• Multidimensionality
• Measurement issues
• Research results
• Theoretical considerations
• Enhancing self-concept
• Question time
Terminology

Student’s self-perceptions include their self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy and other specific beliefs about themselves.

• Self-concept: beliefs about themselves, their personal attributes, and their strengths and weaknesses (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004).
• Self-esteem: refers to feelings people have about their capabilities and worth (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004).
• Self-efficacy: is a personal belief about one’s capabilities to organise and implement actions necessary to attain designated levels of performance (Bandura, 1997).
Student Population

Summarising international research with this population is problematic as various terms are used to define students who struggle with learning.

For purposes of today's discussion, I will be including research conducted with students with either a mild intellectual disability or learning difficulty.
The importance of Self-Concept

Educational policy declarations throughout the world cite the development of a positive self-concept as one of the central goals of education. Why?

“I cannot think of a single psychological problem – from anxiety to depression, to underachievement at school or at work, to fear of intimacy, happiness or success, to alcohol or drug abuse, to spouse battering or child molestation, to codependency and sexual disorders, to passivity and chronic aimlessness, to suicide and crimes of violence – that is not traceable, at least in part, to the problem of deficient self-esteem.” Branden (1994, p. xv)
The role of school

For children and adolescents, school represents the most critical context for the development of self-concept outside the family (Purkey, 1970).

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) advises how self-concept is formed.
Outcomes for students

Students who struggle with learning are assumed to be especially in danger of experiencing poor self-concept and the adverse consequences that follow from this poor self-concept.

Studies have indicated that adolescents with learning difficulties are much more likely to be victims of depression and suicide than normally achieving students (Bender, Rosenkranz, & Crane, 1999).
Historically, self-concept has been considered to be a unidimensional construct. Therefore, one’s self-concept would be represented as a single, general score.

A substantial amount of construct validity research has demonstrated that self-concept is a multidimensional construct (see Marsh and Hattie, 1996) and that a general scores masks important distinctions that individuals make about their adequacy in different domains of their lives (Harter, 1990).

In 1976 Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton reviewed the theoretical and empirical research and identified significant deficiencies in self-concept research. In an attempt to remedy some of these deficiencies, they developed a multifaceted, hierarchical model of self-concept.
A multidimensional construct

- Becomes increasingly multifaceted with age.
- Organised and structured.
- As one descends the hierarchy, self-concept becomes less stable.
- It has both a descriptive and an evaluative aspect.
Measuring Self-Concept

Until recently, developments in the measurements of multidimensional self-concept did not extend to students with learning difficulties.

“It appears that retarded children do not make distinctions about the specific competence domains but rather simply make judgements about one’s competence at activities in general, regardless of their nature. Thus they think one is either competent or not” (Silon & Harter, 1985, p. 223).

“Most researchers used assessment scales that were normed on normal populations. Unfortunately, my search of the literature revealed such instrumentation to be disappointingly sparse and serves to highlight this critical void in the availability of self-concept measures for special populations” (Byrne, 1996, p. 221).
Measuring Self-Concept

The Self-Description Questionnaire I (SDQ-I) is internationally regarded as the strongest multidimensional self-concept instrument for school-age students (Byrne, 1996).

The development of the SDQ-I Individual Administration has allowed the measurement of self-concepts for young children (Marsh & Craven, 1997) and for students with mild intellectual disabilities (Tracey, Marsh & Craven, 2003).

Q6  I do well in reading
Q14 I like reading
Q21 I am good at reading
Q29 I am interested in reading
Q37 I enjoy doing work in reading
Q45 Work in reading is easy for me
Q53 I look forward to reading
Q61 I learn things quickly in reading
Research results

Research over the last two decades has clearly evidenced that students with learning difficulties have lower academic self-concepts and general self-concepts than their normally achieving peers (e.g. Crabtree, 2003; Gronlick & Ryan, 1990).

Despite the differences in academic self-concept their nonacademic self-concept is almost equivalent to that of typically achieving peers. So it seems that lowered self-concept is limited to the areas in which they face particular difficulties.
Research results

Are there developmental changes?

Are there gender differences?

Does their educational setting make a difference?
Theoretical considerations

*Big Pond Little Pond Effect* (Marsh, 1984): students compare their own academic ability with the academic abilities of their peers and use this social comparison as one basis of developing their own academic self-concept.

The *internal frame of reference*: when students compare their own performance in one specific school subject with their own performance in other school subjects (Marsh & Craven, 1997).

*Attributional style* (Seligman, 1991): students with learning difficulties often display a negative attributional style.
Enhancing self-concept

It is difficult to enhance self-concepts using short-term intervention programs.

Common recommendation for a child with poor self-concept ...

Now let's imagine that every person at the school gets a gold medal for something they are really brilliant at. What will your gold medal be for? Draw a picture or write something that you are really brilliant at.
Enhancing self-concept

✓ Cognitively oriented intervention programs are more effective than affectively oriented programs (Hattie, 1986).

✓ Intervention is more successful if it targets specific facets, rather than global aspects (Craven, Marsh, & Debus, 1991).
Enhancing self-concept

Self-concept enhancement research frequently employs two approaches, either direct enhancement or indirect enhancement.

Direct praise and performance feedback (internally focused feedback).

Attributional retraining strategies: Weiner (1986) claimed that in self-concept enhancement programs the perceived causes of performance must be changed in order to change self-concept. What does this look like?
Attributional retraining

Intervention involving the following components has been found to be effective for these students (Tabassam & Grainger, 2003).

1. Identifying that the child had competently completed the task (“you have done your maths problem well”)

2. Attributing success on the task to the child’s ability in the subject area (“you obviously have the ability to do well in mathematics“)
Attributional retraining

3. Attributing success on the task to the child’s efforts in using the right strategy (“you have done that maths task well as you put in effort and used the right strategy”)

4. Attributing failure on the task to the task difficulty and the need to learn the correct strategy coupled with ability attributional statements (“It is a bit of a difficult task but as you have the ability you will be able to work it out by using the correct method”).
Summary

Research demonstrates that students with learning difficulties report significantly lower academic and general self-concepts than do their peers.

Lowered self-concepts result in negative outcomes and thus the facilitation of positive self-concepts is especially important for students with learning difficulties.

Educators and health professionals play a significant role in achieving this goal and should draw on recent research findings to ensure that efforts are effective and do indeed improve the quality of life for students with learning difficulties. Strategies should include both direct and indirect enhancement techniques.
Question Time