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SELF- CONCEPTS OF CHILDREN WITH EXCEPTIONALITIES IN NIGERIA.



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Abstract: Nigerian children continue to embrace multidimensional issues in schools and within their communities. Such issues include societal negative perceptions and teacher expectations. Unfortunately, there are no legal mandates requiring both the regular and special education teachers to identify, assess, place and instruct these children with exceptionalities in a humane way that neither labels nor destroy their self-concepts. Therefore, in this article, the authors mention and discuss multidimensional issues that confront children with exceptionalities in Nigeria and render techniques that will help in reducing labels and enhance their self-concepts.

Keywords: Special education, self- concept, legal mandates, advocacy

INTRODUCTION:

There is much in current literature reporting research in self-concept of learners with learners with exceptionalities. There are several recent articles on self-perception (), self-concept (), and learners with multiple types of exceptionalities ().

This paper will begin with an explanation of the terms self-concept and exceptionality. Following will be a review of literature regarding self-concept of learners with various forms of exceptionalities. However, in Nigeria there are neither legal mandates that prescribe best practices nor protect children with exceptionalities from social discriminations and negative labels and perceptions both in the wider communities and school learning environment conditions. This lacuna apparently impacts negatively on the quality of service delivery by special educators. It is not quite clear how these identified issues influence the self- concepts of children with exceptionalities. Lastly a brief discussion of improvement in self-concept will be provided, then implications and conclusion.

SELF-CONCEPT AND EXCEPTIONALITY

Self-concept is generally understood to be self-perception, and has sometimes been used interchangeably with terms such as self-esteem and self-efficacy (Rudasil, Capper, Foust, Callahan, & Albaugh, 2009). Students who have a good self-image and positive self-perception are believed to be adaptable to their environments (Campbell-Whatley, 2008). Enhanced student self-determination also appears to improve self-perceptions and is viewed as a best practice (Wehmeyer & Powers, 2007). The construction of a learner's self-concept is developed from internal comparisons made within the learner, as well as from external perceptions of the learner's own abilities in comparison to those of others within a given context (Rudasil et al., 2009). According to prominent research, there is a

high positive correlation between positive self-concept and academic achievement. One article suggests that some modern research points to the idea that children with disabilities may not have poor self-images, and may indeed have a high self-esteem due to the pressure of coping in peer groups with being different (Sze & Valentin, 2007). This information seems to be somewhat contrary to what most of the modern research indicates, which is that children who are different struggle with self-concept.

Webster (2009) defines the word exceptional as forming an exception, rare, better than average, superior, deviating from the norm, having above or below average intelligence, physically disabled. Those identified as disabled over the age of five comprise approximately 19% of the population, and educators often have to make a determination regarding the educational potential of these exceptional students; despite provisions for their academic education, these students have high dropout rates and are disproportionately underrepresented in the modern work force (Johnson, Musial, Hall, Gollnick, & Dupius, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, learners with exceptionalities will include those with physical and learning disabilities, the gifted and English language learners.

DIFFERENCES IN SELF-CONCEPT

Students with special needs are at risk of developing a negative self-concept from negative interactions with others in their environment (Sze & Valentin, 2007). When non-disabled peers provide negative feedback to such students, they may believe or think they have no importance (Sze & Valentin, 2007). Hatamizadeh, Ghasemi, Saeedi, and Kazemnejad (2008) studied 120 children in an elementary classroom in Iran. Of the total sample, 60 children were hearing impaired and mainstreamed into a normal hearing classroom. Following

completion of a self-perception profile by the students, they learned that the hard of hearing children rated significantly more poorly than their hearing classmates, and many rated themselves as having low or poor competence overall. Just over 18% rated themselves as having a high level of competence. Early school experiences determine the foundation for learning and the scope of academic abilities for the learner. If the learning experience is positive, the academic development will likely be positive, leading to a higher self-perception (Sze & Valentin, 2007). There do seem to be age ranges during which students naturally experience decline in self-concept, largely due to the emotional, cognitive and physical changes that occur in middle to late childhood as well as adolescence (Rudasil et al., 2009). These times for the disabled child are likely enhanced due to the changes adolescence brings coupled with the additional challenges that disability brings.

Students with learning disabilities have similar struggles with self-concept. Such students generally have to work hard to develop academic competencies, making the development of a strong self-concept difficult (Campbell-Whitley, 2008). Dyslexic students, for example, experience shame and frustration related to coping with literacy difficulties (Long, MacBlain & MacBlain, 2007). The way that students respond to teaching, as well as how they react to success and failures, is determined by the way that they feel about themselves (Campbell-Whitley, 2008). Teaching a dyslexic child would be a challenge due to the perceived failures on the part of the student and the impact this has on the way the student feels.

Gifted students comprise another category of exceptional learners for which self-concept is also an issue of focus. Since self-concept is directly correlated to academic achievement, one would think that self-concept would be extremely high for all gifted learners. According to Rudasil et al. (2009), one longitudinal study found that between grades 7-12, students' self-concept scores declined, with female scores declining at a faster rate than male scores. The scores varied not only according to age and gender, but also according to socioeconomic status as well, with economically advantaged students demonstrating a higher self-concept than those from a lower socioeconomic status. Overall, the study found that gifted students' self-concepts still remain more positive than non-gifted students.

Immigrant students who are learning English comprise another group of exceptional children who struggle with issues related to self-concept. Of the 5.1 million students in the United States, 1 in 10 is learning the English language (Thompson, 2009). For the average learner of English, two years of study are required to hold conversations, while 5-7 years are needed to write essays and understand readings well (Thompson, 2009). Robers and Schneider (1999) found that immigrant students show lower self-concept, higher anxiety, and weaker school performance than non-immigrant children. Adding the typical developmental changes during adolescence to the struggles of learning a new language, adapting to a new educational system, establishing a new social network, and learning new customs and appropriate behavioral norms make the development of a positive self-concept extremely difficult

for immigrant children.

IMPROVED SELF-CONCEPT

Scholars have identified several ways to improve self-concept for students with some of the exceptionalities discussed in this paper. Powers et al., (2007) suggest an alternative to basing practices with such students on conclusions drawn by professionals. Practices impact students with disabilities and their families, and often a professional who is removed from the situation is making decisions about best practices with the students and their families. They suggest youth-directed research in which disabled students participate in study methodologies as the researchers test potential programs and examine the level of participation by the students. Research methods would be selected that not only address the research question for the professional, but also provide an opportunity for growth and empowerment of the group being researched through participation. Researchers are finding that participants in this type of research make progress in reaching personal goals while achieving collective activities and goals of the researchers (Powers et al., 2007). Students may be more attuned than professionals to the value of learning information in a hands-on manner that increases their capacity to navigate real world systems (Powers et al., 2007).

Self-determination has also become a best practice and increases the capacity for a disabled student to transition from the world of education into adult life (Wehmeyer & Powers, 2007). This perspective asks the education system to provide a better transition strategy from school to work and adulthood through maximizing student self-determination. Like any other learner, disabled students must act on their decisions and learn from the outcomes (Campbell-Whitley, 2008). Students can only do this if they have an adequate understanding of strengths, limitations, and inner capabilities (Campbell-Whitley, 2008), all of which stem from the student's self-concept. Hatamizadeh, Ghasemi, Saeedi, & Kazemnejad (2008) stress the importance of increasing the frequency of assessments of mainstreamed children to adequately understand self-concept.

There are also interventions available for students with learning disabilities. Merlone & Moran (2008) studied fifth grade students with learning disabilities who were provided with a ten week unit to aid in the transition to middle school. The curriculum included lessons about special education, specific learning styles, coping strategies, and advocacy. The lessons highlighted strengths, reframed any negative presumptions about the educational program, and taught the students more about their particular educational results. At the conclusion of the ten weeks, students felt more positive about their strengths and empowered to face new challenges in middle school. This ten week course seemed to greatly improve the self-concept of students with learning disabilities. Teachers tend to utilize pedagogical teaching models that are mechanical when working with students with dyslexia; this often results in a failure to address the holistic needs of the student (Long, MacBlain, & MacBlain, 2007).

Several interventions have been proposed to

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address the problem of English language learners within the school system. Some schools have instituted English-only policies, which have been shown to increase the high school dropout rate of minority students. Other schools, such as Hylton High School just outside of Washington, have segregated their classrooms and modified their teaching strategies to prepare immigrant students adequately for testing in order to access the coveted federal No Child Left Behind funding (Thompson, 2009). Hylton spends extensive time on rehearsing test questions and answers with their students, allots students to an extraordinary amount of time for certain milestones. For example, English-learning students at Hylton spend an entire semester on Romeo and Juliet, while traditional students spend only one month on the reading. Hylton also devotes a higher teacher to student ratio to the English learners. As a result Hylton's program produces higher test scores and graduation rates, both of which number tend to be low nationally (Thompson, 2009).

SUMMARY

This paper has provided a thorough review of several articles written within the last two years on the self-perception of learners with exceptionalities. Some discussion has been provided regarding various types of exceptionalities, and comment has been provided regarding current intervention strategies. Clear evidence has been demonstrated that a positive self-concept greatly contributes to the success of the exceptional student, both academically, personally, and as an adult within mainstream society. As for the conflict between whether or not exceptional children struggle with issues of self-concept referenced earlier in this paper, the research leans in the favor of these children having a considerable struggle. This is something that educators should provide considerable attention to; the capacity that educators have to impact the self-concept of exceptional children reaches far beyond the classroom, following them into adulthood and the remainder of their lives.

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