

SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF TWICE-EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS:

THE INFLUENCE OF LABELS AND EDUCATIONAL PLACEMENT ON THE SELF-CONCEPT OF POST-SECONDARY GIFTED/LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

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Research highlights the importance of positive self-concept for children and the influence of self-concept on long-term success (Elbaum, 2002; Fong & Yuen, 2009; Rudasill, Capper, Foust, Callahan, Albaugh, 2009). However, studies involving G/LD students typically focus on identification and placement options (Kay, 2000; Siegel & Ladyman, 2000; Yssel, Prater, & Smith, 2010), with parents and teachers as the principal participant sample populations rather than the students themselves (i.e., Bianco, 2005; Chamberlain et al., 2007; Mann, 2006; Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992; Yssel et al., 2010). Adopting a qualitative case study approach, this study explores how eight post-secondary G/LD students perceive the development of self-concept over time, and how labelling and educational placement influence those self-perceptions. Data collection included a demographic questionnaire, a Body Biography, and a semi-structured interview. Guided by the Marsh/Shavelson model of self-concept (1985) and the Social Identity Theory (1986), my analysis of the findings revealed that participants often perceived the gifted and LD components of the G/LD identification as separate entities. A gifted in-group membership was more often perceived when discussing individual strengths, while an LD in-group membership was perceived when reflecting on weaknesses. This study indicates that identification methods and placement options influence development of self-concept for G/LD students.

The big contradiction in my life was that I was really smart, but I wasn't doing well enough.
– Amanda

I don't think many people who have a learning disability would consider themselves smart because that's not what they're taught to believe. – Darren

It's like all of these very mixed messages happening. – Isabelle

While students identified as gifted have strengths, they may also have a range of disabilities that present social and academic difficulties. Often, when a learning disability is identified, support is generally focused on addressing the disability while the student's giftedness is ignored or unrecognized within the classroom (Chamberlin, Buchanan, & Vercimak, 2007). Educational placement options in Ontario for these circumstances include a range of environments from inclusive settings (indirect support in a regular classroom) to more specialized circumstances (special education school). Unfortunately, placement decisions are complicated by a G/LD dual diagnosis and finding "the right fit" remains an issue for these students.

Understanding participants' perceptions of a dual G/LD identification, and their educational experiences resulting from this identification, need to be understood in the context of 'labeling'. Labels not only influence how society views an individual, but also how that individual perceives him- or herself. (Gates, 2010; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007; Markham, 2005). In education, teachers, parents, and policy makers use labels such as gifted, LD, and G/LD as a short-hand for how to best educate students who require extra support. However, labels may pose social and emotional difficulties for G/LD students.

Statement of the Purpose

Research has not explored the self-concept of G/LD students and/or the influence of labelling and placement on self-concept from the student perspective. Given the needs of this unique population and how students cannot receive educational support without a gifted identification or a LD diagnosis, it is important to understand how these labels and placement options impact G/LD students' perceptions of self-concept.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Regardless of how labels emerge and are applied, there are consequences for the student they are applied to. For example, research shows that female high school students identified as gifted often hide and/or minimize their abilities to avoid being ostracized by peers (Rudasill et al., 2009). Similarly, students identified as LD often conceal their difficulties from peers in hopes of greater social acceptance (Loeb, & Jay, 1987; Pajares, 1996).

Literature Review

Historically, the identification of dual G/LD students is a relatively recent practice in schools. There are, as a result, few qualitative studies focusing on the self-perceptions of these students. Overall, research in this area has focused on identification processes (Crepeau-Hobson & Bianco, 2011; Waldron, Saphire, & Rosenblum, 1987), and on the types (and outcomes) of intervention methods and programs (Assouline, Foley Nipcon, & Huber, 2006; Hannah & Shore, 2008; Nielsen & Higgins, 2005; Robinson, 1999; Weinfeld et al., 2002).

Research into the social and emotional difficulties of G/LD students highlights increased social isolation (Hogan, McLellan, & Bauman, 2000) and loneliness (Hogan et al., 2000) as compared to non-identified peers, disruptive class behaviours, and an overall resistance to school and schoolwork (Neihart, 2008). In contrast, G/LD students may also exhibit behaviours associated with giftedness, such as high levels of task commitment, creativity (Renzulli, 1987; 1986), and persistence (Baum & Owen, 1988). However, regardless of their similarities to other gifted students, G/LD students are more commonly associated with the characteristics they share with the LD population (Baum, Emerick, Herman, and Nixon, 1989; Woodrum & Savage, 1994).

Self-Concept, Labels, and Educational Placement

Implicit in identifying a student as G/LD is the expectation that the school will provide, and the student will receive the appropriate educational support for her/his gifted and LD needs. However, educational placement may act as a label (an indirect consequence of the identification process) and research has found that placement options affect not only how labels are internalized, but also how self-concept develops (Diez, 2010; Jones & Hensley, 2012; Savaria, Underwood, & Sinclair, 2011; Vanderbrook, 2006).

Some authors observe no specific correlation between self-concept and educational placement (Elbaum, 2002, p. 216; Vaughn et al., 1992), while others believe that the relationship is too complex to conclude as simply positive or negative. For example, research suggests that self-concept is lower for students identified as LD when they are placed in a regular classroom setting (Butler & Marinov-Glassman 1994; Morvitz & Motta, 1992) while others argue that self-concept is higher when these students are placed in a regular classroom (e.g., Forman, 1988; Kistner et al., 1987).

Many studies focus on the identification processes and self-concept of gifted and LD students, but none focus on the interaction of self-concept, labels, and educational placement from the perspective of the G/LD student, which is important when considering the needs of G/LD students. To provide a better understanding of these perceptions, this study addressed two research questions:

1. How do the education-related influences of labeling and educational placement interact with the development of self-concept and to which group he or she identifies with?
2. How does the student identified with giftedness and a learning disability perceive the development of self-concept over time?

Theoretical Framework

Two theories formed the theoretical framework of this study. The first is the Marsh/Shavelson model of self-concept (1985) that divides the notion of self-concept into academic and non-academic domains. Academic self-concept relates to English, history, mathematics, and science, while non-academic self-concept relates to social, emotional, and physical self-concept. Each component of this hierarchical and multidimensional model is inter-related (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985) and thus the model can be used to understand how/if these students compartmentalize themselves with respect to the self-concept of their identification and how self-concept develops because of educational changes.

The second is the Social Identity Theory (SIT) which regards identity as derived from group membership (Brown, 2000) and answers the question *Who am I?* (Forte, 2007). Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), the theory asserts that individuals strive to achieve and maintain a positive social identity through social comparisons between the *in-group* (people who are “similar” to me) and relevant *out-groups* (people who are “different” from me) (Brown, 2000). Due to the role of educational placement in developing in-group/out-group comparisons, SIT complements this study by exploring how the labels of gifted and LD contribute to perceptions of group membership.

Methodology

This qualitative research uses a multiple case study approach and a socio-constructivist epistemology.

Participant recruitment

Following permission from the university’s Research Ethics Board, my recruitment sources included the Association for Bright Children (ABC), the local Learning Disability Association, a university Graduate Students’ Association, and the same university’s service for supporting the academic needs of students with disabilities. Each association and university service distributed a recruitment text (via their monthly newsletter, a Facebook page, or emails to registered students) as an invitation to participate in the study.

Participants

Participants of this study included eight English-speaking post-secondary students (ages 20-42) from a large Ontario university, as well as a smaller university in Québec. The type of learning disability was not an important focus, nor were participants' areas of giftedness. The focus of the study was on educational experiences resulting from the G/LD identification and its influence upon self-concept. The responses to the demographic questionnaire offered insight into the circumstances surrounding the process of identification for the participant. An outline of the demographic information for the participants is provided in the following table.

Table 1. Demographic Information for Participants: The Identification

PARTICIPANT	IDENTIFICATION	TIME OF IDENTIFICATION	LOCATION OF IDENTIFICATION	EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE
Amanda	Gifted, ADHD, Dysgraphia	Elementary	Ontario	Mainstream, Gifted, LD program, Resource
Catherine	Gifted, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia	Elementary	Ontario	LD program
Darren	Gifted, Dyslexia	Elementary	Ontario	LD program
Elizabeth	Gifted, "Perceptual LD"	Elementary	Ontario	One day a week Gifted program
Felix	Gifted, ADHD, Dexterity issues	Pre-elementary for gifted, CÉGEP for LD	Québec	Mainstream, private, mainstream
Graham	Gifted, Dyslexia	Post-secondary	Manitoba	Homeschooled
Hannah	Gifted, Dyscalculia	Post-secondary	Ontario	Mainstream
Isabelle	Gifted, Dyslexia	Elementary	Ontario	Arts-based high school, LD program

Data collection instruments and procedures

During this study's data collection, each participant was asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, construct a Body Biography, and participate in a discussion/semi-structured interview.

Demographic questionnaire. Created for this study, the demographic questionnaire asked participants about their age, their time, place and type of identification(s), their past educational placements, their current program of study, and about any familial incidences of exceptionalities.

Body biography. To complete this task, participants were asked to place words, items, and photos onto a life-sized drawing of a human body (see Figures 1 and 2) to visually represent perceptions of the self (Morawski, 2010; Underwood, 1987).

Figure 1. Graham's Body Biography



Figure 2. Isabelle's Body Biography



A standardized kit of items was provided to each participant, however, participants also drew from personal items, such as photographs. Although Body Biographies have gained popularity in arts-based literacy programs (Morawksi, 2010; Underwood, 1987) and counselling/therapeutic settings (Bussert-Webb, 2001; Smorti, Risaliti, Pananti, & Cipriani, 2008), they are also used to conceptualize thoughts that are not easily expressed with words alone (Bussert-Webb, 2001; Smorti et al., 2008).

Discussion/semi-structured interview. Upon completion of the Body Biography, participants were asked to explain each item and to answer questions related to labels, educational placement, social identity, group membership, and self-concept. This discussion served as a verbal recognition and assimilation of abilities/disabilities, strengths/weaknesses, identity, group membership, and self-concept. Further, the discussion allowed the researcher to organize the data through the theoretical frameworks of the Marsh/Shavelson model of self-concept and the Social Identity Theory.

Ethical Considerations

With any study focusing on interactions with participants, ethical considerations such as the written informed consent, the confidentiality of participants' personal information, the data storage of the audio recordings, the transcribed data, and the completed Body Biographies need to be addressed. In addition to material artifact considerations, issues of trustworthiness such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of data were also addressed.

Data Analysis

Each session was audio-recorded, transcribed, and emailed to the participant for review and approval. Analyses of the transcriptions were guided by the theoretical

frameworks and used Bloomberg and Volpe's (2008) "roadmap" as a guide for identifying the "big ideas", themes, and meaningful information both within and across cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 2006). Each transcription was colour-coded based on 1) self-concept and its sub-domains, 2) social-identity, and 3) social comparisons. When coding for self-concept, each sub-domain was assigned a colour and self-perceptions that related to one of the self-concept domains was assigned its corresponding colour. For social identity, each self-perception that answered the question *Who Am I?* was highlighted, as well as perceptions that related to being gifted, LD, or G/LD. Finally, the coding for social comparisons included three colours based on 1) the self vs. those who are gifted, 2) the self vs. those who are LD, and 3) the self vs. those who are G/LD. This coding helped to highlight the main themes both within and across cases.

Discussion of Emergent Themes

From the cross-case analysis, the following six main themes emerged: I Am Different; Do I Fit In?; Am I Good Enough?; If I Had Been...; Do You See Me? Do You Hear Me?; and I am More Than My G/LD. Within each of these themes, participants discussed social, emotional, and academic concerns, related to self-concept development and to perceptions of social identity and group membership.

I Am Different

An over-arching theme was how participants felt they were different from others. One participant felt as though she had, "(...) something big running through [her] veins (...) something exciting," while another felt that being an original and eccentric person was, "similar with other gifted people." However, others felt that being different was derived from the LD identification. For example, one participant discussed how, "it's fairly odd to have someone so traditionally intellectually driven, especially since the school system [is] not built to help dyslexics." Regardless of the reasons why participants felt different from others, this feeling was supported by the literature, as G/LD students often feel, "as if they are one of a kind" (Nielsen & Higgins, 2005). Overall, this feeling influenced participants' academic, social, and emotional self-concepts. For some, it enhanced perception of their strengths and abilities, and it empowered them to overcome their LD. However, for others, the LD component led to issues with self-acceptance and being made to feel less than others.

Do I Fit In?

Participants also faced social difficulties with making friends, being teased by their peers, preferring time alone, and finding social interactions physically draining. All of these experiences influenced their social identity, and in turn, their general, social, and emotional self-concepts. In the literature, the social difficulties of gifted students and those identified as LD have been well-documented. Gifted students have been

shown to have better relationships with gifted peers than with non-gifted peers, to express a greater attachment to family than to friends, preferring to be alone (Kao, 2011), and being socially rejected by peers for not sharing the same interests (Baum et al., 2001). Conversely, those identified as LD have been shown to be at risk for teasing by peers (Olenchak, 1995), are less likely to be socially accepted, and are more likely to be neglected and/or rejected by their peers than those not identified as LD (see Kavale & Forness, 1995; Swanson & Malone, 1992; Wiener, 1987).

Am I Good Enough?

Participants also described the pressure they felt and expectations they strove to live up to academically, setting goals to meet those expectations, difficulties with perfectionism, and struggles with anxiety and mental health. The focus for participants was how the G/LD identification influenced academic achievement and how, “the big contradiction [...] was that I was really smart, but I wasn’t doing well enough.” There was also a sense of the LD component impeding academic success because, “when you’re combating something that’s working against you, you have to have a goal and you have to be able to self-motivate or you’re never gonna get anywhere.” The psychological and behavioural consequences of the relationship between depression and self-esteem, and the outcomes of stress and coping with academic self-concept, are supported in the literature (see Gallagher, Harradine, & Coleman, 1997; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Plucker & McIntire, 1996). Their research (and this current study) suggests that the fit between placement and educational needs is an important influence in a student’s development of academic self-concept. Further, finding the right fit also influences social and emotional self-concepts, and this was reported by the participants of this study as well.

If I Had Been...

Some participants wished that circumstances had been different. For example, some wished for a different placement, an earlier identification, or a different identification altogether, while others viewed their educational experiences as having been the best fit for their academic needs. Overall, educational placement because of a G/LD identification influenced participants’ academic, social, and emotional self-concepts positively when they felt their educational needs were met, and negatively when they felt another placement could have offered a better fit.

One of the most poignant examples of this was provided by a student who moved to an LD-focused high school in her last year of high school. She felt that, “if I had gone to [the LD-focused high school] my entire education, my perception of school would be completely different, as would high school.” Unfortunately, the relationship between educational placement and self-concept has produced mixed results in the literature. For example, some studies found no association between self-concept and educational placement (Elbaum, 2002, p. 216), while others conclude that placement does influence self-concept, either positively or negatively, depending on the study

and age of the sample (i.e., Butler & Marinov-Glassman 1994; Morvitz & Motta, 1992). In this present study, participants indicated a more positive self-concept when they perceived that their academic needs were met. Conversely, participants indicated more negative perceptions of self-concept when they felt they had been unsupported (or insufficiently supported) in their educational needs.

Do You See Me? Do You Hear Me?

Some participants felt invisible, hidden, and unheard because of their educational placement and G/LD identification which led to negative social and emotional self-concepts. For one participant who had experienced segregated LD programming for much of his educational life, he described feeling both “hidden and helped.” He felt “helped” in the sense that the program fostered an ability to read and write, but he felt hidden and, “very interdependent on people you were in the program with.” Some participants felt that specialists and teachers had too much say in their educational decisions and as a result, participants had to spend time self-advocating for their educational needs, which was perceived as, “a lot of work that the other students aren’t having to do.” Overall, research shows that G/LD tend to self-advocate more than those who are not identified as G/LD (Dole, 2001); they demonstrate resiliency in the face of a disability. The participants of this study also felt empowered to advocate for their own needs, which served to positively influence self-perceptions of self-concept and socio-emotional development.

I Am More Than My Identification

While identification resulted in specific educational experiences which then influenced perceptions of self-concept, the participants defined themselves in ways that were not limited to educational placement, identifications, or labels. Specifically, participants derived a positive sense of physical, social, emotional, and general self-concepts and group membership through participation in creative arts, athletic activities, and their own hobbies and interests. Research supports this finding, showing that G/LD students often develop their self-concept from extracurricular activities (Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005; Dole, 2001).

Overall, the domains of the Marsh/Shavelson model were strongly intertwined. Participants’ self-concepts were deeply rooted in their educational experiences, experiences that directly resulted from their G/LD identification. Most dominant was the interplay between academic self-concept, and emotional and social self-concepts. It is also important to note how participants’ hobbies and interests appeared to buffer other potentially negative influences upon self-concept. Further, the findings indicate that participants often perceived the gifted and LD components of the G/LD identification as separate entities. For example, a gifted in-group membership was perceived when discussing individual strengths, while a LD in-group membership was perceived more often when reflecting upon their weaknesses. These findings support

the notion that identification methods and placement options can impact the development of self-concept for G/LD students.

Contributions

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of self-concept, social identity, and G/LD research by offering insight into the socio-emotional experiences of G/LD students in relation to labels, educational placement, and the influence of academic expectations on socio-emotional development. Understanding these influences is important not just for general self-concept, but for academic achievement, social relationships, and emotional health. While the conclusions of this study cannot be applied to all G/LD students, the study does provide insights into the perceptions of G/LD students that may be helpful for educators and families making educational decisions that impact students' well-being.

Finally, this study contributes to multi-modal knowledge and research methods using a Body Biography. There are no documented studies within the G/LD or self-concept literature that use this approach which is interesting considering that a Body Biography provides alternative ways of self-description and self-reflection. These self-descriptions and reflections are particularly valuable when combined with the semi-structured discussion during which participants explain the reasons and intent behind each item on the biography because in the process they provide insight into their self-perceptions.

Limitations

It is important to recognize the factors that may limit or weaken a study to understand their influence on both the present study and future research. Some of the limitations of this study include: variability in identification criteria, researcher biases, the transferability of data, the Hawthorne Effect, and the use of a Body Biography as a main data collection tool.

In relation to transferability, the participant sample was extremely heterogeneous with respect to educational experiences and identification processes, which limits the transferability of the findings. Additionally, the use of a Body Biography is not typically associated with G/LD research, nor is it a common tool within social identity and self-concept research. The main limitations, however, are that each participant approached the task differently and the biographies did not stand alone without the accompanying participant discussion. Further, it is possible that some G/LD students purposely avoided participation in this study based on the visual form of self-expression required for the Body Biography task.

Further Research

From the findings, several recommendations can be offered. First, the results suggest that re-examining the identification process and its implications could help to relieve the emotional and academic stress of a G/LD identification, and in turn improve self-concept. Perhaps a discussion between teachers and the students could occur, explaining the process and the meaning/ implications of a G/LD diagnosis. Second, G/LD students may benefit (socially, emotionally, and academically) from a placement option that supports both components of the G/LD identification. Third, because of educational labelling, social perceptions influenced participants' perceptions of academic achievement and expectations. Fulfilling academic expectations is difficult for G/LD students and increased sensitivity among educators, parents, and students could help build a better understanding of the educational strengths and limitations of G/LD students. Fourth, because of student socio-emotional risk evident in this study and in G/LD literature, creating and implementing support strategies to mitigate these risks for G/LD students is recommended.

Weaving the Fabric of Education: Past, Present, and Future

In the past, self-concept has been explored predominantly through quantitative means, which limits the depth of self-perceptions and individual experiences that may be gained through a qualitative approach. In terms of the present, this is the only study to have used a Body Biography as a main data collection instrument to explore the self-perceptions of self-concept for post-secondary students identified as G/LD. Finally, this study highlights the need for further research into the educational needs of G/LD students since they continue to be a unique population with no "one size fits all" approach to identification methods or educational placement options.

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