THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ISOLATION AND SELF-CONCEPT IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

In this study the relationship between isolation in the elementary school classroom and self-concept was investigated. It was hypothesized that children who were isolated or rejected by their classmates would possess low self-concepts. No such relationship was found. The design of the sociometric instrument used to identify the isolate generated more questions than it answered. Also discussed is the instrument chosen to measure the level of self-concept of an elementary school child. One significant finding of this study was that the self-concepts of suburban children differed from those found in the rural sample.

Résumé

Cette étude a exploré le rapport entre le concept de soi et l'isolement dans une salle de classe au niveau élémentaire. L'hypothèse affirmait que les enfants isolés ou rejetés par leurs confrères posséderaient un concept de soi plutôt négatif. Cette étude ne confirma pas cette hyyothèse. Le type d'instrument sociométrique utilisé pour identifier l'élève isolé a provoqué plus de questions que fourni de réponses. On discute également l'instrument choisi pour mesurer le niveau du concept de soi de l'enfant au niveau élémentaire. Une découverte significative de cette recherche est que le concept de soi d'enfants vivant dans les banlieues diffère de celui d'enfants vivant à la campagne.

Teachers have long been interested in both the performing and the non-performing student in the classroom. As educators, the authors have an expressed concern specifically for those students who are not performing in the class according to their potential. It has been noted that in many cases these children seem also to be loners, rejects, etc. It would seem that a healthy learning environment for each child in the class would be one in which there is uninhibited, mutual and friendly interaction among each and every pupil. It follows, therefore, that a classroom containing social loners and rejects is not conducive to optimal learning for these pupils.

Social relationships in the school are extremely important for the child. Working and playing successfully with other children and relating ap-propriately to the teacher are important in most cases for effective learning to take place. Moreover, a child's attitude toward self is strongly affected by the attitude of the peers and the teachers (Dinkmeyer & Caldwell, 1970). Children form opinions of their abilities, emotional states, and attractiveness largely from the feedback they get from others (Combs, 1962). If this feedback is not positive (as it happens to be in the case of rejects and isolates), then the self-concept is directly affected. "Heavy ridicule and negative criticism often blocks the development of a healthy self-concept and restricts further learning" (Mattocks & Jew, 1974, p. 203). One can therefore imagine the adverse effects of social isolation with respect to not only the child's immediate learning in the school setting, but also

to his attitude and personality in general. A lack of self-esteem is almost always an indication of stress, tension, and poor mental health (Fox, Luszki, & Schmuck, 1966). McCandless (1961) also has shown that children with poor self-concepts are generally more anxious, less well adjusted, less popular, less effective, less honest, and more defensive. It is not impossible to predict, then, the possible future of many such children; for instance, as the school drop-out, the juvenile delinquent, the depressed and anxious adult.

Self-concept and achievement appear to be interrelated — that is, poor achievement usually promotes a depreciation of one's self-concept which, in turn, leads to continued poor achievement. Do self-concept and isolation follow a similar circular relationship (that is, isolation promoting a depreciation of one's self-concept, in turn leading to continued isolation)? The authors subsequently became interested in the relationship between isolation in the classroom and self-concept.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between isolation in the classroom and self-concept. Specifically, the problem was twofold:

a) to establish if there exists a correlation between "isolation" (as defined below) in the classroom setting and level of self-concept as measured by the Group Semantic Differential (GSD).

b) to determine whether scores on these measures differ for students of differing socio-economic backgrounds as well as between sexes.

HYPOTHESES

The hypothesis was that children identified as "isolates" or "rejects" in their classrooms would also be likely to possess below-average or very low self-concepts which would accordingly be reflected to some degree in the GSD scores of each of these students.

Question (b) was included as part of the study since it has been indicated (Coopersmith, 1967) that there appears to be no clear and definite pattern of relationships between social class and positive and negative attitudes toward the self. In addition, the study showed that though persons in lower socio-economic classes are most likely to report lower self-esteem, there are almost as many persons in this class who report high esteem as persons who report low esteem. Also mentioned is that children in the upper middle class are most likely to have high esteem and those in the lower middle class low or medium esteem, but the effects of differing social position are not very striking.

Definition of Terms and Testing Instruments

Many sociometric tests were inspected (e.g. in Dinkmeyer & Caldwell, 1970) to see which included appropriate measures of isolation. Of those inspected, *the sociogram* as described by Ohlsen (1964), with slight modifications, was selected since it seemed most consistent with the authors' purposes. Ohlsen found the sociogram to be a very effective method for studying pupil's reactions to each other. It gives a picture of how each child regards other children in his class such that by analyzing the results, one can separate the isolates and rejects from the rest of the group. In this particular study, pupils were given a list of five questions to answer (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sociometric Questionnaire

My name is ....

After reading each question, write the names which you think of *first*.

1. If you were going to have a party, which three pupils would you invite first?
   ....; ....;
   ....

2. If you had to leave out three pupils from the party because there was not enough room, which three would you leave out?
   ....; ....;
   ....

3. If you could choose three pupils to help you with a project, which three pupils would you choose first?
   ....; ....;
   ....

4. If you had to leave out three pupils from the project, which three pupils would you leave out?
   ....; ....;
   ....

5. Perhaps there are some in this class who you do not know well enough to know how you really feel about them. Who are they?
   ....; ....;
   ....; ....;
   ....; ....

The isolate refers to any pupil in the classroom who is identified by this sociometric method as the unknown in the group. This child receives

fewer than seven choices (positive or negative). *The reject* is defined as a student who receives many negative responses from his classmates (rejected) such that his sociometric score, after processing, falls in the lowest ten percent of the sample scores. *"Isolation"* includes the combined scores of both the isolates and the rejects (for purposes of this study).

Self-concept as it relates to the present study refers to the individual's self-structure, defined by Rogers (1951) as an organized fluid but consistent conceptual pattern of the "I" or "me" which are admissible into awareness, together with the values attached to those concepts. In general, measures of the self-concept have demonstrated moderate stability over time (McCandless, 1961), so the authors expect that their measures would be stable over time as well.

Self-concept can be operationally defined by the instrument — *Group Semantic Differential* (GSD) — used to measure the construct (Westwood, 1969). In the present study, self-concept is defined according to an individual's rating on several bipolar adjectival rating scales for the concept: "The Way I See Myself". This concept refers to an individual's perception of "actual self" at the present time of life. A low self-concept is defined as a GSD score falling within the lowest ten percent of the total sample GSD scores.

Adaptability of the instrument to the present investigation was possible. As Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) state: "There are no standard concepts and no standard scales; rather, the concepts and scales used in the particular study depend upon the purposes of the research" (p. 76). The major criterion suggested for choosing concepts is "good judgment" on the part of the researcher(s). In other words, "there is no general semantic differential test as such" (Osgood et al, 1957, p. 76). The semantic differential constructed for this study is shown in Figure 2.

Method and Procedure

A. Location

The sample was drawn from two elementary schools of relatively equal pupil population size but located in different geographical areas in the province of Quebec: a city elementary school situated in a middle-class area and an elementary school located in rural Quebec, southwest of Montreal.

Figure 2: Group Semantic Differential (GSD)

My name is ....

Circle the one number in each example which best describes the way you feel about yourself right now.

1.	Good	1	2	3	4	5	Bad
2.	Hopeless	1	2	3	4	5	Hopeful
3.	Perfect	1	2	3	4	5	Imperfect
4.	Unwanted	1	2	3	4	5	Wanted
5.	Clean	1	2	3	4	5	Dirty
6.	Clumsy	1	2	3	4	5	Graceful
7.	Beautiful	1	2	3	4	5	Ugly
8.	Unsuccessful	1	2	3	4	5	Successful
9.	A Somebody	1	2	3	4	5	A Nobody
10.	Usually Misunderstood	1	2	3	4	5	Usually Understood
11.	Important	1	2	3	4	5	Unimportant
12.	Untrustworthy	1	2	3	4	5	Trustworthy
13.	Mature	1	2	3	4	5	Childish
14.	Stupid	1	2	3	4	5	Smart
15.	Strong	1	2	3	4	5	Weak
16.	Follower	1	2	3	4	5	Leader
17.	Brave	1	2	3	4	5	Cowardly
18.	Slow	1	2	3	4	5	Fast
19.	Careful	1	2	3	4	5	Careless
20.	Boring	1	2	3	4	5	Interesting
21.	Organized	1	2	3	4	5	Unorganized

B. *Sample*

All children between nine and twelve years of age (as of September 30) inclusive, from four classes in each school were tested (special classes were excluded). Urban school: n=123; rural school: n=129, N=252.

C. *Testing Procedures* (Research Design)

1. Each of the four classes from each school was administered the sociometric questionnaire (Figure 1).

2. Immediately thereafter, each class also received the GSD (Figure 2).

3. The results from the sociometric questionnaire were processed to yield one sociometric score for each child (see Ohlsen, 1964, pp. 266-271 for calculation).

4. All GSD results were processed to yield a self-concept score for each pupil. Subjects' scores were determined by summing the individual scale weightings (one to five) over the total of the twenty-one items, that is, maximum, 5 x 21=105; minimum score 1 x 21=21. (Weightings on all even items are reversed such that a score of 1 on item 12 (for example) has a true weighting of 5).

5. The above procedures (1 - 4) were carried out separately for each school. Both samples were then analyzed for significant similarities and differences according to selected tests of significance.

Tests and Results

Pearson 'r' correlation between sociometric scores and GSD scores for entire sample (N=252): $r=.19$.

There does not seem to be any relationship between sociometric scores and GSD scores. This result does not support the main hypothesis.

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and "t" values for the measures across schools and between the sexes. There were no significant differences between the sociometric scores of both schools, nor were there any differences for GSD scores across sex. There was, however, a significant difference between the GSD scores (self-concept levels) of both schools.

Discussion of Results

It appears that the results of the present exploratory study do not support the stated hypothesis that children identified as "isolates" or "rejects" are more likely to possess low levels of self-concept. Possible explanations for the absence of such a relationship, or alternatively, for failure to demonstrate one, are discussed in the following sections.

What was significant, however, was the finding that the GSD scores of children in the urban school in the upper middle-class suburban area were significantly higher than the scores of the children in the rural school. Rigorous classification between the two schools was not possible due to insufficient information. However, observational data would suggest that a real difference in socio-economic class exist between the two areas.

This finding is interesting in light of the results noted earlier in Coopersmith's 1967 study indicating the absence of any such relationships. The children from the higher social status families in the present sample have significantly higher self-concepts compared with those children from lower social status families. Perhaps a reason for the observed difference between the two areas is that parents in the upper middle-class suburban area expect more from their children in terms of

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and "t" Values for
Measures Across Schools and Between Sexes

Measure	N	$\overline{X}$	SD	t
GSD: School A	123	80.44	14.85	4.19*
: School B	129	71.65	19.45	
Sociometric score: School A	123	0.58	14.71	0.41
: School B	129	1.19	10.21	
GSD: Female	117	78.82	16.35	0.65
: Male	135	77.58	13.89	

*p<.001

Note: School A is the urban school
      School B is the rural school

achievement in school and are, at the same time, able to provide more material goods and opportunities.

Although the main hypothesis was not supported, some important subsequent findings associated with designing and conducting the study emerged.

The first difficulty was associated with the choice of questions for the sociogram. Questions 1 through 4 (Figure 1) were quite relevant, but question 5 gave some difficulty. Many students failed to understand what had been asked. Quite often they repeated names of students already mentioned in answer to previous questions, or they would not put anything because they didn't know the names of all their classmates. Ohlsen (1964) uses this type of question to help pick out the "isolates". The authors were not able to do so due to contamination of responses and inconsistency in student comprehension of the question and, consequently, devised their own system of selecting the "isolates".

It is therefore suggested for others interested in employing this type of sociometric technique that, during its administration, they give explicit instructions about question 5, and supply a class list as well to help those students who are not familiar with their classmates (especially if the test is administered early in the school year).

Secondly, finding a suitable instrument to measure self-concept was indeed difficult. Westwood (1969) found the Osgood Group Semantic Differential to be one of the better instruments presently available to measure concepts such as "The Way I See Myself". The first problem here was in constructing a test that could accurately and reliably measure the self-concept in young children. Westwood (1969, p. 86) describes one useful for adults, but in this study, not only were the length of the test and types of scales important factors to consider, but vocabulary that would be relevant and meaningful for nine- to twelve-year olds was also a crucial variable. Could the students understand the bipolar adjectives given them? As it turned out, several students could not comprehend some of the terms, and not every student understood an item or concept in the same fashion (e.g., does "clean" mean washing regularly, or does it mean "I don't talk dirty language"?).

Aside from those difficulties relating to the construction of this GSD, such as relevance of items, vocabulary of items, and length of test, other problems were encountered in administration. Some students were very suspicious of the intentions, even when the purpose was explained,

and this hostility may have interfered with the validity of their responses (since they did not wish to "give away all their secrets"). Perhaps the GSD should have been administered to each child individually. Further questions concerning validity arise from the possibility that the younger students responded differently from the older ones. Moreover, how reliable were the items themselves? These questions would have to be looked at in more depth.

Finally, there exists the question of self-concept as a good explanatory concept. Michael, Plass, and Lee (1973) for instance, compared two methods of measuring the self-concept using the same scale. Results of the comparison of student self-report and two teachers' reports on four hypothesized constructs, namely mental health, personal self, academic self, and social self indicated that self-concept is a complex entity made up of many constructs, the validity of which is dependent upon the measurement procedure.

Implications for Further Research

Thus far, one explanation of why the hypothesis was not supported has been attempted in terms of faulty experimental methodology. An alternate answer, however, may be that there simply does *not* exist any relationship between the two constructs; i.e., perhaps the original hypothesis is incorrect. It was found that, in some cases, children who possessed relatively low GSD scores were not necessarily identified as "isolates" or "rejects", but, on the contrary, turned out to be the "stars" of the class (i.e., those who stood out as being frequently positively regarded). Moreover, having a relatively high GSD score did not immediately identify that child as a star, which of course is what a positive correlation in the hypothesis would have led one to predict. Perhaps "isolates" generally do have poor self-concepts, but this does not necessarily mean that the stars possess very good self-concepts. It should be noted that possession of a highly positive self-concept, in itself, is not necessarily wholesome (some of the isolate boys scored extremely high on the GSD test). Such scoring may indicate a high defensive pattern, and much of it may be due to cultural factors, particularly among boys (Dinkmeyer & Caldwell, 1970).

Furthermore, Coopersmith (1959) in a study of fifth and sixth grade children found that those who regarded themselves poorly (in the present study, those with lower GSD scores) were found to be more popular, better academic achievers, although more self-critical and more ambitious.

They were well-regarded by both teachers and peers (such as our "stars"). On the other hand, another group of children with poor self-concepts with which their teachers agreed (their "real selves") were less popular, achieved less, were more anxious, and held lower ideal concepts of themselves (yet, at the same time, were more self-critical) than those youngsters with good self-concepts which agreed with favourable "real self" teachers' ratings.

Only a few of the "isolates" and "rejects" of the present study, however, seemed to report poor self-concepts with which their teachers agreed. Some of the "isolates" and "rejects", as a matter of fact, had quite high GSD scores. It is suggested that these students either: a) were very highly defensive; b) were simply unaware of the fact that they were "rejects" and "isolates" and responded to the GSD actually feeling quite good about themselves; or c) were aware of being rejects and still liked themselves. It was stated previously that the child's self-concept develops in reference to reactions to him from those individuals who *mean something to him*. It is often assumed that the reactions of one's classmates are very meaningful to any child. It is, however, quite possible that for some of the "isolates" or "rejects" with high GSD scores in this study, reactions of their classmates were *not* meaningful, and therefore reporting a high self-concept here may not bear any relation to the testing context. They may be reacting to quite positive feedback received elsewhere, perhaps from other students not in their class, from their parents, or from various other sources. In effect, they may be relatively indifferent to any reactions from present classmates, be they positive or negative.

It is interesting to hypothesize, however, that those "isolates" and "rejects" who did report poor self-concepts perhaps responded to the GSD having the true knowledge of their status in the classroom (i.e., they knew "where they were at"). Perhaps recognizing one's "real" state is a healthier condition than producing unconscious defenses to cover it up. The authors suggest this phenomenon to be "perceptive isolation" versus "unbeknown isolation".

CONCLUSIONS

Although the main hypothesis was not supported, this study does show teachers may use the sociometric method described here to identify and distinguish between pupils who are accepted, rejected, or not known (isolates) in the class. Teachers and counsellors should periodically check to see whether "isolates" in the classroom are really left out socially in the playground, lunchrooms, hallways, and other places where children congregate besides that particular classroom.

Finally, the study suggests that future research should consider more rigorously the qualitative differences between isolation and rejection, and the subsequent implications of this distinction for the emotional development of the classroom child. There is also some indication that further development, evaluation, and refinement of the measuring technique with GSD as a self-concept scale be encouraged.

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