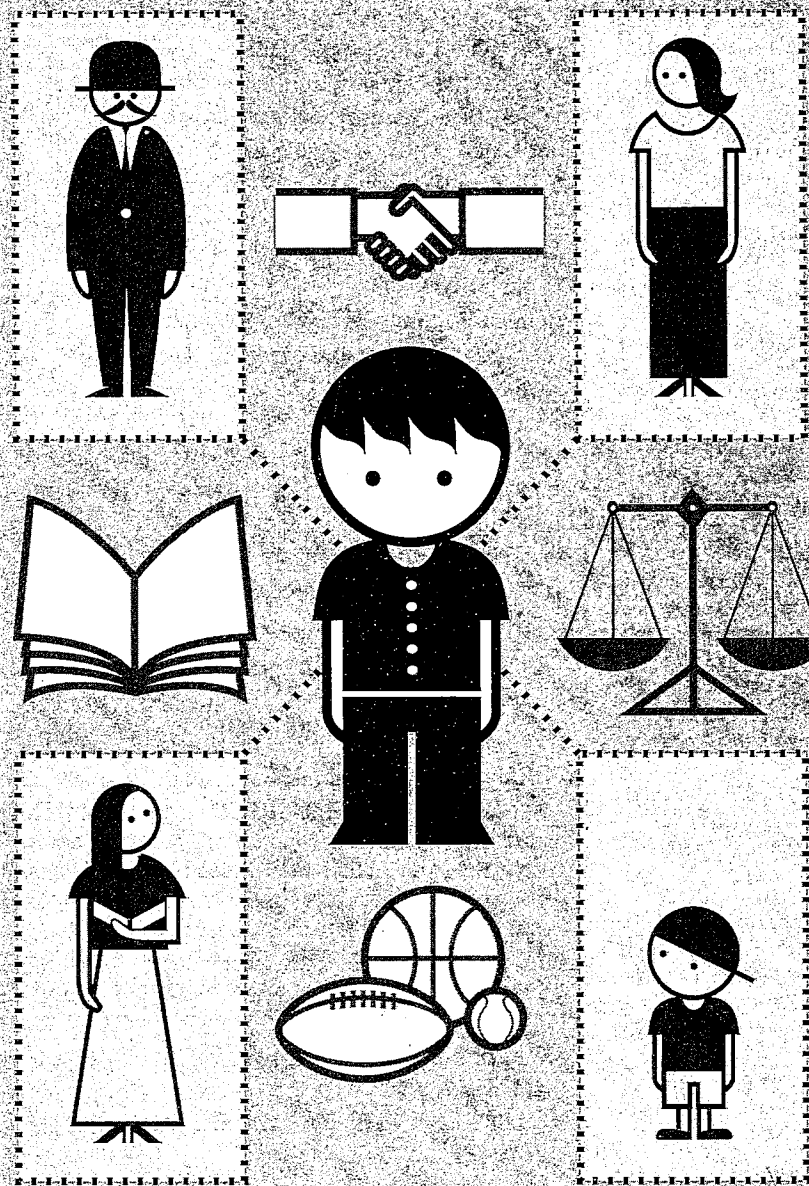


SELF-CONCEPT

Gifted Students



ASSESSMENT-BASED INTERVENTION

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Teachers of gifted students, like teachers of any other students, are perennially concerned with the self-concept of their students. The Pyryt-Mendaglio Self-Perception Scale (PMSPS) was designed to assist in addressing this important educational concern (see box). While PMSPS can be used with adolescents of both gifted and average ability, this article illustrates its use with gifted students and presents an approach to self-concept enhancement

that is assessment-based. The PMSPS was developed to address several needs in this central aspect of affective education. First is the need to develop a scale that can be readily administered in the classroom, with a straightforward scoring technique. More important is the need for a measurement device that assists the teacher in intervention. While attempting to fulfill these needs, we felt that the scale should also reflect the complexity of self-concept.



Much of the research indicating that gifted students score high on self-concept is a global, single-score approach to self-concept measurement (e.g., Coleman & Fults, 1982; Janos, Fung, & Robinson,

1985; Karnes & Wherry, 1981; O'Such, Havertape, & Pierce, 1979). A single-score approach does not adequately reflect the complexity of self-concept (Hoge & Renzulli, 1991; Schneider, 1987). Our own re-

search with the PMSPS (Pyrvt & Mendaglio, 1992) indicates that when the measurement approach is multidimensional, gifted adolescents do not necessarily score high across the board. Our work suggests that gifted students score higher on four factors (academic, social, athletic, and evaluative) than students of average ability, but that the major contributor to that difference is the academic self-perception. Approaches to both assessment and intervention need to take a multidimensional approach to this important area. Specifically, measurement of self-concept should be based on several facets of self and not attempt to reduce the various and multiple perceptions of self into a single score.

Our interest in the self-concept of gifted children also stems from the anecdotal reports of teachers, parents, and psychologists who are concerned with difficulties such as underachievement and poor social adjustment and see self-concept as a common explanation for these difficulties. The research finding that gifted children, as a group, have positive views of self is of little comfort to teachers and parents who are confronted with a gifted child experiencing social and/or school difficulties. The characteristics of gifted children may predispose some of them to low self-concept. Gifted children are said to possess high expectations of self, a tendency to be self-critical, and a tendency toward perfectionism (Delisle, 1992).

Theoretical Base

In an effort to address the complexity of self-concept, we have taken a multidimensional, multitheoretical approach that incorporates established theoretical perspectives, current empirical findings, and a novel feature called *valence*. The PMSPS is termed *multidimensional* because its construction reflects a multifactor approach. As with other recent approaches such as the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 1988), the PMSPS operationally defines self-concept in terms of the four factors cited earlier (academic, social, athletic, and evaluative). The scale is *multitheoretical* in that the items themselves and the clustering of the items in factors reflect multiple theoretical per-

Pyrvt-Mendaglio Self-Perception Survey

School _____ Grade _____

Gender _____ Date of Birth _____

Please rate the importance of succeeding in each of the following areas—doing well in school, getting along with others, participating in athletics, and developing positive feelings about oneself. Indicate the number that reflects your rating: very important = 3, important = 2, or not important = 1.

How important are the opinions of the people that follow to you—father, mother, favorite teacher, and best friend? Indicate the number that reflects your rating: very important = 3, important = 2, or not important = 1.

Below you will find a series of statements describing your perceptions of what other people think of you. Please read each statement and indicate the extent of your agreement: strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

1. I perceive that my mother thinks that I am smart.
2. I perceive that my father thinks that I get along well with people.
3. I perceive that my favorite teacher thinks that I have athletic ability.
4. I perceive that my best friend thinks that I am a good person.
5. I perceive that my father thinks that I have athletic ability.
6. I perceive that my favorite teacher thinks that I am a good person.
7. I perceive that my best friend thinks that I am smart.
8. I perceive that my mother thinks that I get along well with people.
9. I perceive that my favorite teacher thinks that I get along well with people.
10. I perceive that my best friend thinks that I have athletic ability.
11. I perceive that my mother thinks that I am a good person.
12. I perceive that my father thinks that I am smart.
13. I perceive that my best friend thinks that I get along well with people.
14. I perceive that my mother thinks that I have athletic ability.
15. I perceive that my father thinks that I am a good person.
16. I perceive that my favorite teacher thinks that I am smart.

Below you will find some statements describing your perceptions. Please read each statement and indicate the extent of your agreement: strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

1. I am smarter than other children my age.
2. I get along better with people than most children my age.
3. I have more athletic ability than other children my age.
4. I feel better about myself than other children my age feel about themselves.
5. I have accomplished a challenging academic task.
6. I have demonstrated leadership ability.
7. I have accomplished an athletic goal.
8. I have proven to myself that I am a good person.



Figure 1. Profile Sheet Illustration of Assessment—Intervention Connection

VALENCE					
AREA	ACADEMIC	SOCIAL	ATHLETIC	EVALUATIVE	
	3	3	1	2	
SIGNIFICANT OTHER	MOTHER	FATHER	TEACHER	BEST FRIEND	
	2	3	1	3	

MODEL X SELF-CONCEPT AREA MATRIX						
	REFLECTED APPRAISALS				SOCIAL COMPARISON	ATTRIBUTION
	MOTHER	FATHER	TEACHER	BEST FRIEND		
ACADEMIC	3	4	3	4	2	3
SOCIAL	2 *	4	3	3	2	4
ATHLETIC	2	3	3	3	1	2
EVALUATIVE	2	3	3	4	2	3

*Shaded scores indicate relatively low self-ratings.

spectives that are well established in the psychological and educational literature. Three theoretical approaches have been used: reflected appraisals, social comparison, and attribution. Reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Sullivan, 1953) is probably the best-known approach. It emphasizes the contribution of feedback from significant others as having paramount importance in the development of self-concept. This perspective also views self-concept as multiple: People develop a variety of self-concepts relating to roles they occupy and situations they experience. Social comparison and attribution emphasize the role that the person plays in her or his self-concept. In social comparison (Festinger, 1954), individuals contrast the perception of their ability, behavior, and accomplishments to those of others. In attribution (Kelley, 1967), individuals infer their own traits based on self-observation, in much the same way as they infer the dispositions of others based on their observations of the behavior of others.

To further address the conceptualization of self-concept, we have included a *valence* component to the PMSPS so that the scale adheres to our conceptualization of self-concept. The student is asked to rate the importance of each of the four factors. A similar rating of importance to self is obtained for four significant others: mother, father, teacher, and best friend. Since we are interested in subjective assessment, we feel that an indication of the student's evaluation of the self-referent importance of those areas is necessary in obtaining a clearer picture of his or her self-concept. Many of the items ask students to rate their perception of how mother, for example, evaluates them. A rating of the importance of mother to the student also aids in interpretation of such

items. The valence component of the scale assists in the interpretation of the scores. A low rating on an area of low importance to the student will be interpreted differently from a low rating on an area of high importance.

The Poryt-Mendaglio Self-Perception Survey

The content of the PMSPS operationalizes the multitheoretical perspectives just noted. The self-concept component of the scale consists of 24 items. Students are asked to rate themselves on a four-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. For the **reflected appraisals portion**, the students are asked to rate themselves as they believe each of the four significant others perceive them. A sample question in the reflected appraisals portions would be *I perceive that my mother thinks I'm smart*). This is done for each of the four factors. For the **social comparison portions**, the students are asked to rate how they perceive themselves compared to age peers for each of the four factors (e.g., *I am smarter than other children my age*). For the **attribution portion**, they are asked to acknowledge demonstrations of competence in the four do-

main (e.g., *I have accomplished a challenging academic task*). Under the valence portion of the scale, the students are also asked to rate the importance of both the areas that the items address and the significant others. These are rated on a three-point scale, with 1, 2, and 3 indicating Not Important, Important, and Very Important, respectively. The PMSPS is suitable for individual or group administration. Administration takes approximately 15 minutes.

Scoring

The PMSPS yields two general categories of scores: a Model X Self-Concept Area Matrix and Valence. There are scores associated with each theoretical perspective for the four self-concept areas. The sample Profile Sheet (Figure 1) indicates the student's actual rating of each component. In the Model X Self-Concept Area Matrix, the self-perceptions of the student are organized around the theoretical approaches and areas of self-concept. This part shows the ratings of each area according to reflected appraisals, social comparison, and attribution.

Under "Reflected Appraisals," the self-ratings associated with each of the four areas of self-concept are shown. Consis-



tent with this approach to self-concept, the ratings present the student's perceptions of how each of four significant others perceive him or her. This model suggests that self-concept develops from the feedback individuals obtain from significant others. It is important to emphasize that it is not necessarily the actual feedback that is important, but the student's perception of that feedback. Sometimes the actual and perceived feedback are congruent; other times they may not be. For example, a mother may believe that she is communicating positive feedback to her child with regard to academic ability, while the child may distort or deny that message and perceive it as negative. The ratings noted here, then, are seen as the student's interpretation of feedback that each of these persons provide in their interaction with the student. This distinction is important for two reasons. First, it is an accurate reflection of this model of self-concept. Second, it has implications for intervention, which will be detailed later.

The remainder of the ratings reflect the other two models. Under "Social Comparison," we find the student's self-ratings of how she or he compares to peers in the four areas. Again, it is the student's interpretation that the PMSPS is concerned with, and not the actual rankings of student to peer group. The referent group is not specified; it is left to the student's choice. Both the actual ranking of the student with peers and the rationale for the identification of a specific reference group (agemates, gifted classmates, or mentors) are useful in the interviews conducted by teacher or counselor with each student. Such interviews may also uncover some students' use of factor-specific comparison groups (e.g., one reference group used for academic, another for athletic).

Under "Attribution," ratings of the extent to which the student self-attributes accomplishments in the four areas are shown. In this approach to self-concept, the inferences one makes based on self-observation are said to contribute to self-concept development. In its use here, we are interested in the degree to which the students make favorable inferences about self.

The "Valence" box shows the student's evaluation of the four areas (academic, social, athletic, evaluative) and significant others (mother, father, teacher, best friend). These valence ratings are important in assisting us in an accurate interpretation of the self-perception ratings of the areas that appear below the "Valence" box.

The Assessment-Intervention Connection

Often attempts to help "others improve their self-concepts approach the task in a very haphazard manner" (Frey & Carlock, 1989, p. 180). Our approach to intervention takes a systematic approach to enhancement of self-concept. Both assessment and intervention are theory driven. The approach is based on the following propositions:

1. Effective intervention is related to assessment.
2. Effective assessment and intervention must reflect theory.
3. Effective intervention must incorporate both multidimensional and multi-theoretical perspectives.

Interview and Intervention Strategies

Once the PMSPS is administered and scored, the teacher or counselor should interview the student with a threefold purpose: to discuss the results with the student, to confirm specific deficit areas that were identified by the scale, and to plan a course of intervention. General discussion of the results with the student should include elaboration of some of the ratings. For example, low self-perception in certain areas should be explored and the reference group used in the social comparison items should be identified. The valence scores should be pursued. In short, the teacher is directed to use the ratings on the Profile Sheet as a guide to structure the interview. Confirmation and elaboration of any low ratings are important components of the interview.

In all of this discussion, the teacher should be interested in the adolescent's perspective. It is important to remember when working with gifted adolescents that they are particularly sensitive to discrepancies presented by adults. When we

ask students what they think of themselves, we must be prepared to accept their response. If we convey, either verbally or nonverbally, that their perception should be different, this will preclude our obtaining the validation of the information that the PMSPS has given us. The interviewer must bear in mind that the scale, like other self-report instruments, can be manipulated by the student. An important underlying purpose of the interview is to gauge whether or not the ratings match the manner in which the adolescent talks about himself or herself. Furthermore, the ratings should be contrasted with the teacher's own knowledge of the gifted adolescent gleaned from observation.

The final purpose of the interview is to assist the teacher in planning an approach to intervention. With a confirmation of the self-perception ratings, the teacher can now use the multifaceted, multitheoretical basis of the PMSPS to advantage. Certain guidelines for intervention emerge from the three models on which the scale is based (reflected appraisals, social comparison, and attribution). To illustrate how intervention can be planned, each model is presented here based on the scores shown in Figure 1. The following is a suggested format for structuring the interview and planning the intervention strategy.

Sample Interviewing Approach

General Introductory Remark to the Student. "I would like to talk to you about the results of the questionnaire you completed, where you rated yourself on a variety of things. It's important that you understand that this is not a test; it is meant to tell me how you view yourself. Since it is not a test, there are no right or wrong answers. I want to talk about some of the results so that I can have a clearer picture as to how you see yourself so that I can understand you from your point of view."

Elaboration on Low Ratings. "You'll remember that many items asked you to rate how you believe your mother, father, teacher, and best friend perceive you. When we look at your ratings, we can see that you believe that your mother does not think as highly of you as the other



persons. Let's talk about this. First of all, is this accurate?" (The student is given an opportunity to respond.)

"Also, I noticed that you indicated in the importance ratings that your father is more important than your mother. Can we talk about that?" (Here the objective is to assess the quality of relationships with parents.)

"I also noticed that you have rated your teacher as having little importance for you. And yet you seem to believe that she thinks highly of you in all the areas. I wonder if we can discuss that so that I can understand what you meant by it." (The teacher-student relationship needs specification and exploration.)

"It seems that you consider your best friend as very important to you. Let's talk about that. Who is this best friend, and how long have you known that person?" (The nature of the relationship with the best friend is explored.)

"When you were completing the items that asked you to rate yourself in comparison to others, who were you thinking of?" (It is important to have the student identify the reference group. The social comparison ratings will have a different meaning depending on whether or not the student has used other gifted students.)

"Your ratings suggest to me that you don't value participating in athletics. And you indicate that succeeding in developing positive feelings about yourself is not that important. Let's talk about both of these." (This explores the low valence ratings in athletic and evaluative self-concept.)

"I noticed that you don't believe that you accomplished much in the area of athletics. Also, you rate athletics as very low in importance. I'd like to know more about this." (This examines low ratings on athletic self-concept.)

Planning the Strategy for Intervention

The specific information gathered in the interview is used in conjunction with the guidelines of the three approaches to self-concept for planning intervention. All three approaches may be necessary, depending on the results of each assessment. In the case of the student profile

represented in Figure 1, all components of the profile yield some relatively low ratings, and so guidelines from all three models of self-concept will be used.

Reflected Appraisals. The strategies for intervention should be based on the view that self-concept develops from the interaction of student and significant others. The guidelines here relate to the child and significant other in Figure 1. The student has given two signals of possible problems. She has rated her mother as having relatively less importance, and she has indicated that she believes her mother thinks she is relatively low in the social, athletic, and evaluative areas of self-concept. Furthermore, she has rated her favorite teacher's opinions as not important to her. Yet her self-perception based on her teacher's feedback is relatively high in all areas (a rating of 3 in each).

With respect to the ratings associated with the mother, perception checking is an effective means of intervention. One of the objectives in dealing with this student would be to facilitate the student in verifying the perceptions she attributes to her mother. Eventually, the goal would be for the student to ask her mother questions such as: "Do you believe that I get along well with people?" "Do you think I'm a good person?" "Do you think that I have athletic ability?" This would first necessitate an exploration of the quality of the mother-child relationship as perceived by the student. Before expecting the student to approach her mother with questions, the teacher or counselor should identify and deal with any obstacles such as anxiety associated with conversing with the mother about herself. Then the teacher or counselor would discuss perception checking and rehearse how the student might approach the conversation with her mother. The appropriate items of the PMSPS should be used to formulate the questions.

At times, adolescents may be unable to engage in perception checking despite the teacher's or counselor's efforts to encourage. The teacher or counselor can then consult with the adult either alone or with the student present. In either case, the Profile Sheet and the PMSPS itself are explained prior to the coun-

selor's attempts to verify the student's perceptions.

The focus of intervention may, at times, be the adult. When working with adults from a reflected appraisals perspective, the concern is with the level of significance and communication effectiveness. The valence component of the scale provides an indication of the level of significance that the adult represents for the student. Communication effectiveness can only be gleaned from interviewing the parent or teacher. To be theoretically consistent, both of these factors must be given attention, since feedback from significant others is provided through communication situations. Of concern here is the quality of interpersonal communication between significant other and respondent. It may be that well-intentioned parents and teachers lack appropriate opportunity to interact more effectively with students. In other words, communication effectiveness does not rely simply on the amount of time spent interacting; it requires active attempts to build positive relationships.

In Figure 1, the student's rating of concern is that of "Teacher," who was rated as low in importance. In this case, the teacher should analyze her or his own role with the student. It is clear from this rating and our research that not all significant others are equally significant to the student. It cannot be assumed that individuals who would normally be considered significant to the student are actually significant. In this example, the teacher should investigate the degree and type of relationship that exists between herself or himself and the student. Notice that the ratings in the four areas under "Teacher" are all relatively high; that is, the student believes that the teacher's perception of her is relatively high. However, the PMSPS "Valence" ratings would question the influence of these ratings on the student's self-concept. It is important to remember that these young students are adolescents. It is commonly accepted that teachers, as a group, may lose significance to them during this phase of development. Intervention with the two teachers here may require assisting them in accepting their status with the students.



Social Comparison. When low ratings are found under this category, the student tends to be the focus of intervention. An important guideline from the social comparison model of self-concept formation is identification of the reference group. In Figure 1, the student has relatively low ratings in all four areas of self-concept under this heading. In contrast to the reference group being used, she does not rate herself very highly in the academic, social, and evaluative areas. She rates herself quite low in the athletic area. From her valence ratings, the greatest concern is to explore the academic and social areas, since she rated these as very important to her. The teacher may explore the comparison group(s) that she used in her ratings. The teacher should also assist the student in contrasting behavior indexes in the four areas of self-concept and the social comparison ratings. For example, with reference to the social area, the teacher should ascertain the comparison group used by the student and contrast that with observed peer relations. For the academic area, the discussion would include the student's grade point average and identification of the comparison group used in the self-rating.

Gifted students are expected to perform at higher levels than their same-aged peers of average ability. If a gifted student rates himself or herself lower than this group, then the following three possibilities should be investigated. First, the gifted student may be an underachiever, and the self-ratings may accurately reflect performance but not potential. In that case, intervention would focus on the underachievement. Intervention would include further assessment aimed at identification of skill deficits and other factors such as family dynamics that may be contributing to it. A second possibility is that the student is minimizing his or her own success. In this case intervention would focus on discussing the discrepancy between actual accomplishments and negative perceptions. The teacher or counselor would want to know the processes underlying the student's perceptions. A third possibility relates to the type of reference group used. A gifted student may in fact use a gifted sample as

a reference group. Or in some cases, despite the wording of the items in the PMSPS, the student may use well-known figures in the four areas (e.g., Einstein) against which to gauge his or her own accomplishments. Counseling would be aimed at having the student select a more appropriate reference group—namely, gifted students.

Attribution. As with social comparison, low ratings under the heading of "Attribution" would point toward intervention with the student. The degree to which the student acknowledges her own accomplishment and what factors she attributes them to are of greater interest here. In Figure 1, the "Athletic" area of self-concept received a relatively low rating. Also, the "Valence" rating indicates that the student does not perceive athletics as being important. In the other areas, she rates herself rather highly, especially in the social area.

In deciding where intervention may be necessary, the teacher or counselor should explore the level of opportunity for the student's involvement in athletics and reasons for the low "Valence" rating. With the actual attribution ratings in all areas, the concern is with the type of attribution she has made in each. A primary interest is whether she is internally or externally focused. This is further specified in terms of ability, effort, task difficulty, or luck.

Accomplishment among gifted students should reflect both effort and ability. Simply attributing accomplishments to effort is not sufficient, since this is not acknowledging the full reality. If, in the case of the student represented in Figure 1, she attributed her accomplishments in the academic area to luck, intervention would focus on accepting that both effort and ability were the factors responsible.

Conclusion

The PMSPS was developed to assess self-perception of students of both gifted and average ability. The objective of this undertaking was to develop a scale that would be theory driven and useful in directing intervention. The scale is useful in helping teachers and school counselors assess the area of self-perception, which

is of paramount importance in the education of all students.

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