LAKEHEAD UNIVERSITY

PEER ACCEPTANCE AND SELF-ESTEEM IN GIFTED CHILDREN

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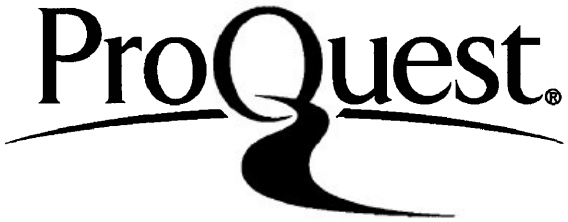

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Abstract

The present study examined how well gifted children in regular classrooms were accepted by their classmates. Fifty-four gifted and 681 normal IQ children in Grades two through eight were given peer ratings by their classmates and tested for self-esteem. Information was gathered from the schools as to each subject's age, sex, classroom, and for the gifted, IQ. It was found that gifted children are more readily accepted in the domain of academic pursuits than in other areas of peer acceptance such as athletic and general social activities. The trend is similar for self-esteem, which is higher for the gifted sample only in the academic area.

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PEER ACCEPTANCE AND SELF-ESTEEM IN GIFTED CHILDREN

Introduction

Research has brought forth a conflicting view of the social life of the gifted child. While the vast majority of studies conclude that academically talented children are well-adjusted socially, sought after and admired by peers, a small but notable minority of contrary findings emerges. This may reflect a difference in the measures of acceptance. Given that people are accepted by others largely on the basis of their strengths, gifted children could reasonably be expected to be accepted more in the area of academic pursuits than in other areas such as athletic and general social activities. This would make peer acceptance a multidimensional rather than a unitary concept.

To explore this, the present study examined three different areas of peer acceptance to see if peer acceptance differences between gifted and average-IQ children varied according to what criteria were used by the children to decide whether or not to accept one's peers. As a parallel investigation, gifted children

were compared with their classmates on four different areas of self-esteem to see if similar variation occurred.

The instruments used to measure self-esteem and peer acceptance were the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (1967) and a researcher-constructed sociometric questionnaire, respectively. Information was gathered from the schools relating to each subject's age, sex, classroom, and IQ.

Peer acceptance and self-esteem were included in the same study because they are two different ways of looking at how a child is valued. Peer acceptance reflects how well a child is valued by others, while self-esteem expresses how well a child values himself. Thus the study, overall, examined how an individual differed according to the criteria for which he or she was valued. This valuing was examined from two distinct perspectives: peer acceptance, or the degree to which a child was valued by others; and self-esteem, or the degree to which a child was valued by himself.

For the purposes of this study, giftedness was defined as degree of aptitude, or IQ, as measured by the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children -- Revised. Children with an IQ of 130 or above constituted the gifted sample.

Review of the Research

Peer Acceptance

Throughout the research, the gifted child stands out as being either extremely well accepted by peers or as having many peer acceptance problems. In a review of the literature, this appears to be a contradiction in findings. Thus, the overall picture of the gifted child's success or failure with peers is in need of further research for clarification.

Peer acceptance in this study is operationally defined in terms of how often a child is chosen by peers as a companion for various activities. The degree of peer acceptance of any one child is seen as proportional to how many same-sex classmates report a preference to spend time with that child, and how intense they report this preference to be.

It has been the traditional view among researchers that gifted children are characterized by a more frequent acceptance by peers. Terman's (1925) pioneering study of gifted students yielded a picture of a child who excelled both academically and socially. Since 1925, the bulk of the literature in this area has tended to lend strong support to the Terman data

(Bonney, 1943; Gallagher & Crowder, 1957; Grace & Booth, 1958; Kelly & Colangelo, 1984; Lehman & Erdwins, 1981; Ludwig & Cullinan, 1984; Miller, 1956; Porterfield & Schlichting, 1961; Terman & Oden, 1947). All of these studies were conducted in a classroom setting.

While the gifted have generally been observed to be relatively free of peer acceptance difficulty compared to average IQ peers, a notable minority of studies show that there are gifted youth who experience problems in peer acceptance and/or emotional adjustment. Some of this literature comes from school settings (Gallagher 1964; Kahrs, 1982), some from studies on families (Ballering & Koch, 1984; Sebring, 1983); some from prevalence studies on maladjusted populations (Lajoie & Shore, 1981; Schauer, 1976), and some from a more global theoretical approach (Altman, 1983). In addition, some of the studies done in school settings mentioned above, (Bonney, 1943; Gallagher & Crowder, 1957; Terman & Oden, 1947) acknowledge that there are gifted children who experience social acceptance problems. In a paper which presents a comprehensive research model, Altman (1983) argues that while the gifted child is subject to many of the same stresses experienced by normal children, there may be sources of stress which are unique to the

gifted child.

The present study examined the question of whether the discrepancy in the research could be accounted for by peer acceptance being in fact multifaceted rather than unitary. Although the literature has not directly addressed the possibility that gifted children are more accepted in academic areas than in social areas, all studies which have found this to be true were done in school settings. This was not the case for those studies which addressed peer acceptance problems. Previous researchers have used only one criterion of peer acceptance, but the present study examined three different dimensions. It was thought that the gifted child might be evaluated by classmates according to criteria which were social, academic, or athletically based, and that gifted children might do better when selected according to academic criteria. These three criteria for peer evaluation were incorporated into the sociogram.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is defined by Coopersmith as:

> The evaluation a person makes and customarily maintains with regard to him- or herself. "Self-esteem" expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval and indicates the extent to which a person believes him- or herself capable, significant, successful, and worthy. In short, a person's self-esteem is a judgement of worthiness that is expressed by the attitudes he or she holds toward the self. (Coopersmith 1981, p. 5.)

While findings on the self-esteem of the gifted have been mixed, gifted children usually demonstrate a higher self-esteem than their non-gifted age-mates (Bailey, 1971; Kelly & Colangelo, 1984; Maddux, Scheiber, & Bass, 1982). Kelly & Colangelo (1984) demonstrated this superior self-esteem to encompass both academic and social areas. However, other investigators have found that gifted children sometimes show low self-esteem in comparison with other groups (Bracken, 1980; Glenn, 1978; Klein & Cantor, 1976; Milgram & Milgram, 1976). Altman's (1983) hypothesis concerning excessive self-criticism may be taken into

consideration here.

It was of interest in this study to examine whether self-esteem varied among different criteria for self-evaluation. Gifted children were expected to demonstrate a higher level of self-esteem on questions pertaining to academic achievement than average-IQ children, but not necessarily on questions pertaining to other areas of their lives, such as home environment and peer acceptance.

Hypotheses

1. Peer acceptance difference between gifted and average-IQ children will vary among the different criteria for peer evaluation, with the gifted being more accepted than the average IQ sample according to academic criteria.

2. Self-esteem difference between gifted and average-IQ children will vary among the different criteria for self evaluation. Specifically, there will be a higher self-esteem in academic achievement among the gifted, while the other measures of self-esteem will not contain a difference in this direction.

Method

Instruments

The instruments used in the study included a researcher-constructed sociometric questionnaire (see Appendix A) and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith 1967).

On the sociometric questionnaire, students were asked to answer seven separate questions by rating their same-sex peers on a scale of 1 to 5. The same-sex rating method was chosen in consideration of the age group being studied. In most populations of school-age children, there is little social interaction between the sexes. Since the present study examines peer interaction, cross-sex ratings were of lesser interest. The questions are listed in Appendix ´A´. Each question appeared at the top of a page and was followed by a class list of either boys or girls on the left side of the page. To the right of the list were five columns headed "Yes, Definitely," "Yes, Probably," "Don´t Know," "Probably Not," and "Definitely Not." Students rated their same-sex classmates by placing checkmarks to the right of each pupil´s name under one of the five

columns. The meaning of the questions and the procedure was carefully explained to the students prior to administration.

Ratings were scored within a range of 1 to 5, with 5 corresponding to a checkmark under "Yes, Definitely" and 1 representing a checkmark under the "Definitely Not" column. The mean rating given to each child was calculated for each of the seven questions, and the arithmetical average of these means was used as an overall peer rating.

Questions on the questionnaire were specific to areas of acceptance. Questions 1, 4, and 6 on the questionnaire pertained to acceptance in a social context; questions 2 and 5 represented academic prestige; and questions 3 and 7 referred to sports and outdoor activities.

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (1967) includes 58 true-false questions pertaining to the subject´s self-attitudes. It contains self-esteem scales in three main areas: peers, parents, school. The test was standardized on a group of 1,748 normal children of both sexes who attended the public schools of central Connecticut. Test-retest reliability was

established at .70 with 56 of these children after a three-year interval.

Subjects

Fifty-four subjects were selected from identified gifted children in grades 2 through 8 in the Separate School Board in Thunder Bay. Those with IQs of 130 or above were selected for the study. Subjects ranged in age from 7 to 14. Thirty-one subjects were male and 23 were female. IQs ranged from 130 to 150.

The gifted children were tested along with their normal IQ classmates, who totalled 681 in number.

Table 1 shows the number of gifted and normal subjects of both sexes in each grade.

Table 1

Distribution of Subjects

Grade	3													
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
GIFTED	0	1	1	4	2	4	8	5	7	4	3	12	2	2
NORMAL	2	10	33	42	48	59	85	61	92	83	42	52	47	24

Procedure

Information was gathered from the school records regarding each subject's age, sex, classroom, and IQ. The researcher-designed questionnaire and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (1967) were administered to children in all 34 classrooms in the 19 schools which were included in the study.

The sociogram was collapsed into three areas by deriving mean ratings from the questions comprising each area. Thus, for any given subject, the score for social acceptance would be the mean of questions 1, 4, and 6; for academic acceptance, the mean of questions 2 and 5; and for athletic acceptance the mean of questions 3 and 7. These three different areas of the sociogram collected information about using three separate criteria for peer evaluation.

Results

Repeated measures analyses of variance were performed on peer acceptance and self-esteem in a 2 x 3 design using giftedness as the between subjects factor and the appropriate criteria for evaluation variable as the within subjects factor.

1) The analysis of variance which examined peer acceptance yielded significant main effects for giftedness [$F(1,732) = 6.24$, $p.<.01$] and criteria [$F(2,1464) = 3.26$, $p.<.05$]. There was a highly significant two-way interaction between giftedness and criteria [$F(2,1464) = 41.73$, $p.<.001$] as shown in Table 2. The means for this analysis are given in Table 3. To further examine the interaction, simple effects of giftedness were calculated within each of the criterion categories. The greatest effect was demonstrated for the academic criterion, [$F(1,732) = 20.54$, $p.<.001$]. The other two criteria did not show a significant effect for giftedness, [$F(1,732) = 2.62$] for social peer acceptance, [$F(1,732) = 0.83$] for athletic peer acceptance.

2) In the second analysis, the gifted students demonstrated a significantly higher level of

self-esteem, as shown in Table 4. [$F(1,535) = 4.69$, $p<.05$] Table 5, the corresponding table of means, indicates that the strong main effect of CSE is mainly due to differences occurring in the large sample of average-IQ students, whose lowest scores were on School Self-Esteem. There was a significant interaction between giftedness and CSE [$F(2, 1070) = 6.03$ $p<.05$]. Simple effects analyses indicate that there was a greater difference between gifted and average IQ students for School Self-Esteem than for any other self-esteem score. In fact, this was the only one of the Coopersmith scales in which the difference was significant, [$F(1,559) = 11.834$, $p<.001$]. No significant effects of giftedness were found in the areas of social self-esteem, [$F(1,549) = 0.923$, n.s.], or home self-esteem, [$F(1,550) = 0.607$, n.s.].

Table 2

Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance for Peer Acceptance

Source of variation	SS	df	MS	
Between Subjects				
Giftedness	9.503		9.503	6.24**
Error	1115.199	732	1.523	
Within Subjects				
Criteria (CPE)	0.379	2	0.190	3.26*
Giftedness x CPE	4.860	2	2.430	41.73***
Error	85.246	1464	0.058	

* $p<.05$
** $p<.01$
*** $p<.001$

Table 3

Mean Peer Acceptance As A Function of Giftedness And Criteria

	Criteria			
Giftedness	Social	Academic	Athletic	N
Gifted	3.880	3.998	3.804	54
Average IQ	3.726	3.494	3.707	680
Entire Sample	3.737	3.531	3.714	734

Table 4

Repeated Measures Analysis Of Variance Of Self-Esteem Scores

Source of variation	SS	df	MS*	
Between Subjects				
Giftedness	27.36		27.36	4.69*
Error	3124.6	535	5.84	
Within Subjects				
Criteria of Self-Esteem (CSE)	34.74		17.37	7.30***
Giftedness x CSE	12.07	2	6.03	2.54*
Error	2546.46	1070	2.38	

* $p<.05$
** $p<.01$
*** $p<.001$

Table 5

Mean Self-Esteem As A Function of Giftedness Group

	Criteria			
Giftedness	Social	Academic	School	N
Gifted	6.024	5.643	5.690	42
Average IQ	5.574	5.398	4.749	495
Entire Sample	5.775	5.417	4.823	537

Discussion

The hypotheses in this study were supported strongly. Evidence was provided that peer acceptance and self-esteem are not unitary concepts, but are in fact multidimensional. They vary according to the criteria one uses to evaluate one´s peers or oneself. It is especially noteworthy that the difference in peer acceptance between the gifted and normal IQ samples appear most strongly in the academic area. Children in this study did not make choices in favour of either the gifted or the normal IQ children in questions of whom to invite to a party, whom to choose for a sports team, with whom to walk home from school, or with whom to go on a camping trip, and they were marginally in favour of the gifted on the question of choosing friends. However, when children were asked who they would like to work with on a school project or who they would like to study with for a test, a bias appeared in favour of the gifted. It is clear from this that the popularity that the gifted child enjoys springs largely from academic prestige.

This raises questions concerning the gifted's supposedly widespread popularity that is so often reported in studies of gifted children. How much of this popularity is attributable to the setting in which peer ratings are taken? Are gifted children truly more popular than children with normal IQ, or do they only appear more popular because peer ratings usually pertain to the classroom? Would a gifted child who is extremely well accepted in a classroom setting be as well accepted on the playground, in his home neighbourhood, or in a community organization apart from school? Also, would a gifted child enjoy as much prestige if he were placed in a gifted classroom in which academic excellence over his classmates would not be as easy? Perhaps different settings would use different criteria for determining who is accepted and who is not. This might form the basis for an interesting future study.

One limitation of the present study was that it did not take peer ratings across sexes but used separate class lists for boys and girls. Either this or the age range of the sample may account for the absence of a sex difference in favour of males among gifted adolescents. It may be that this difference, which has been found in

previous studies, is largely due to differences in opposite-sex ratings.

There are many possibilities for future research in the area of peer acceptance of the gifted. One possibility would be to take peer ratings pertaining to a variety of settings other than the classroom. Perhaps neighbourhood children, relatives, churches, or other organizations would prove valuable as sources of information about the gifted child's level of prestige outside of an academic setting. This information could be compared with data gathered from the classroom to further verify the question of where the gifted child's popularity comes from and how much the setting determines the criteria children use to evaluate each other.

Another possibility is to take into account the values and characteristics of the classroom setting itself. In classrooms in which academic excellence is admired and striven for, children who achieve academically are likely to be given more respect and admiration than they would receive in a classroom in which academic achievement is belittled or ignored in favour of some unrelated set of values. It may be that

the social success of the gifted child depends, not so much on the characteristics of the gifted child himself, but on the values and standards of social excellence set by his classmates. In this vein, perhaps an interesting comparison would be between peer ratings taken of gifted children in regular classrooms in urban communities, gifted children in advanced classrooms, and gifted children in rural communities which embrace mostly working-class values. It may be that different criteria are used in different settings to evaluate peers, which would partially explain why most previous research, which was conducted in classroom settings, found the gifted to be more popular.

One further suggestion for future research is to take both same-sex and cross-sex ratings of gifted children and compare them to discover if a child will rate a child of the same gender differently from a child of the opposite gender, and if so, to explore the nature of these differences.

Self-esteem and peer acceptance may also be dependent on the definition of giftedness. Giftedness, in this study, was defined as high IQ. If giftedness had been defined differently, in terms of creativity for

example, a different pattern may have emerged. This could form another starting point for a future study.

The most interesting finding of this study is the difference in peer ratings among areas of acceptance. There is much room for further research in this area. It is clear that peer acceptance must not be taken as a unitary concept. It is something which is shaped and influenced by, and expressed through, a variety of complex forces within the environment. The present study's finding that peer acceptance varies according to area of acceptance will form a strong basis for future studies.

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APPENDIX

Sociometric Questionnaire

The following questions are designed to measure friendships among children. At the top of each page, you will find a question about your friendships with other children in your class. Below each question, you will find a list of names of children in your class - if you are a girl, it should be a list of girls' names, and if you are a boy it should be a list of boys' names. Beside each name, there are five blanks. Please answer the question at the top by placing an X or a checkmark on one, and only one, blank beside each name. Don't try extra hard to think of the "right" answer -- just mark the box which you think is the best answer to the question for each student listed. Your answers will not be revealed to your classmates or to your teachers.

1. Would you invite the following children to your house for a party?

Names of Children	Yes, Definitely	Yes, Probably	Don't Know	Probably Not	Definitely Not

2. Would you work on a school project with the fcllowing children?

Names of Children	Yes, Definitely	Yes, Probably	Don´t Know	Probably Not	Definitely Not
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3. Would you want the following children on your team in an outdoor sport, such as baseball?

Names of Children	Yes, Definitely	Yes, Probably	Don't Know	Probably Not	Definitely Not
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					

4. Would you walk home from school with the following children if they were headed in your direction?

Names of Children	Yes, Definitely	Yes, Probably	Don't Know	Probably Not	Definitely Not

Would you study for a test with the following children?

Names of Children	Yes, Definitely	Yes, Probably	Don´t Know	Probably Not	Definitely Not
_____			___		
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					
_____					

How friendly are you with the following children?

Names of Children	Best Friend(s)	Quite Friendly	So-So	Not Very Friendly	Not At All Friends

7. Would you like to go camping with any of the following children?

Names of Children	Yes, Definitely	Yes, Probably	Don't Know	Probably Not	Definitely Not