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Exploring a sociocultural approach to understanding academic self-concept in twice-exceptional students



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ABSTRACT

This article explores a sociocultural approach to gaining a deeper understanding of academic self-concept by twice- exceptional students. Academic self-concept is a multidimensional, psychological construct, critical in identify formation. Twice- exceptional students are students who are gifted with a coexisting disability that affects learning. A theoretical framework is presented based on interactions within a theorised zone of proximal development using case-study methodology. Data are analysed according to the constructs of participation-in-practice, legitimate-peripheral-participation, and situated learning. The discussion highlights how social practices and contexts inform the construct of academic self-concept, and how this is embedded within an individual's social interactions. Findings indicate that academic self-concept is influenced by sociocultural forces within the environment, which initially influences the construction of academic self-concept.

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1. Introduction

Twice-exceptional students are those whose giftedness develops in relation to a learning disability (Assouline, Foley Nicpon, & Whiteman, 2010). As a result, twice-exceptional students can present as a dual paradox for education systems, both in terms of having giftedness and disability simultaneously, and in terms of the lamentable lack of nurturing of a potential resource on both an individual and a national level. The paradox of two exceptionalities in schools is due primarily to behavioural issues, lack of community knowledge, and challenges with identification (Vail, 1989). Notwithstanding over twenty years of empirical research on twice-exceptional students, the influences on the academic development of twice-exceptional students, that is, perceptions about academic competence, remain virtually unexplored in a qualitative sense. As such, this paper explores the use of a Sociocultural approach to understanding the academic self-concept of twice exceptional students. Support for using a sociocultural approach to explore academic self-concept in twice-exceptional students comes indirectly from the gifted field itself, as was called for at the National Association for Gifted Children by the then President, Joyce Van Tassel-Baska, in 2006.

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1.1. Academic self-concept in twice exceptional students

Academic self-concept plays a critical role in identity formation (Marsh & Hau, 2003) and is considered to be important for academic success in school (Mendaglio, 2013). It comprises several related perceptions of self, “competence, self-worth, interest, enjoyment, and intentions, to name but a few” (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 29). However, there is a paucity of research exploring the academic self-concept of twice-exceptional students (Townend & Pendergast, 2015).

2. Theoretical framework

Drawn from the work of Vygotsky (1978), the seminal works of Wertsch (1998), exploring the process of participation-in-practice, and Lave and Wenger (1991), exploring community of practice through the processes of legitimate-peripheral-participation and situated learning, provide the basis for the development of a sociocultural approach to understanding academic self-concept in twice-exceptional students.

Participation-in-practice is the process of practising, and therefore learning, a practice. Participation in the practices of a community might also provide ‘a database from which people abstract general principles and construct models of the world’ (Hatano & Wertsch, 2001, p. 79). As a result, those practices that are culturally valued by a community are enhanced over time. If the community values the practices then they are more likely to be repeated and reinforced (Cole, 1996).

To explore academic self-concept using participation-in-practice, as posited by Hatano and Wertsch (2001), it is necessary to link social and cultural settings and practices with individual cognitive development. Interactions with others, and the contexts in which they occur, play important roles in both the learning and development of a person (Hatano & Wertsch, 2001). Of particular importance are the practices involved in the interactions (Goodnow, Miller & Kessel, 1995). Practices such as schooling or learning to drive are organised by the culture in which the person lives and produce a significant outcome.

Legitimate-peripheral-participation is concerned with how an individual's intentions to learn are engaged, and how their academic self-concept is informed through the social, interactive process of becoming a full participant in sociocultural practice. Lave and Wenger's (1991) research into legitimate-peripheral-participation suggests that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to partake fully in the sociocultural practices of the community; in other words, learning by being in the location of practice and gradually getting the ‘hang of things’ while being accepted by those involved. As such, legitimate-peripheral-participation provides a platform for exploring how and why twice-exceptional students, although gifted, may marginalise themselves to the periphery of the gifted population in the school institution, despite their recognised giftedness.

Situated learning pertains to social co-participation, in a specific environment, community-of-practice, or context that enables a learner to construct knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situated learning locates the individual's engagement with, and acceptance of, the practices within a context or community of practice, and thus how that acceptance or alignment with the practices informs the development of academic self-concept. Lave and Wenger (1991) maintain that learning is a feature of membership in a community of practice. The learning processes entail both the development of an individuals' membership in the community and the shaping of identity. Situated learning is interwoven with legitimate-peripheral-participation and participation-in-practice. The peripheral nature of the two latter processes ultimately become less peripheral with legitimate recognition from the community, and is often organised by the community (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).

With this understanding of theoretical constructs, a Sociocultural approach may be developed in relation to understanding the development of an individual's academic self-concept. This approach highlights those influences that are external or intermental to the individual's development, and those influences that process the internalisation, or intramental phase of development. These areas of influence may then be framed within the sociocultural notion, ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD).

Although termed a ‘zone’ in the literature (Vygotsky, 1978), the ZPD may be considered to be a non-physical abstract ‘space’ in which the inter- and intramental dimensions of development co-exist (see Fig. 1). The black dots in the intermental part of Fig. 1 include interactions with significant others, artefacts, social and cultural contexts and practices, legitimate-peripheral-participation, participation-in-practice, and situated learning. The white dots in the intramental plane include self-reflection, perceptions of self, and the internalised development of academic self-concept.

Fig. 1 illustrates a process of interchange between the intermental and intramental influences that may inform the construction of academic self-concept. Vygotsky viewed the ZPD as a way to better explain the relationship between a student's learning and cognitive development, in that learning was always posited as preceding development in the ZPD. In this sense, the ZPD provides a prospective view of cognitive development, as opposed to a retrospective view that characterises development in terms of a person's independent capabilities.

Through the lens of sociocultural theory, therefore, it can be assumed that the intermental will influence the intramental (Dole, 2001) and vice versa. The influences on academic self-concept as represented in Fig. 1 can be illustrated through excerpts from a case study undertaken as part of a larger study (see Townend, 2015). The case study explores a student,

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