

EXPLORATION OF SELF-CONCEPT IN CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS THROUGH SELF PORTRAIT DRAWINGS

1st Author: Rati Khurana 2nd Author: Nimisha Kumar

Assistant Professor Founder & CEO
Department of Psychology Ascend PsyCare
IILM University, Haryana New Delhi, India
Indiadrnimisha_fbs@sgtuniversity.in
Khurana.rati29@gmail.com

Abstract

Introduction: Literature has led us to conflicting and unclear results about the relationship between Self-Concept and children with Special needs. It leaves the question unanswered whether there is or not a clear connection between the two. Assumptions have been created that children with special needs usually report a significantly low Self-Concept when compared to other children of their age. Terms like "self-idea", "self-observations", "confidence", "self-image", "self-assessments", "self-comprehension", "self-esteem", and "self-respect" have been utilized to allude to a person's thoughts and emotions about oneself (Damon & Hart, 1986; Minke et al., 1996; Grolnick & Ryan, 1990; Morvitz & Motta, 1992; Stone & May, 2002). Self-Concept is simply the discernment including our mind frames, sentiments, and information about our aptitudes, capacities, appearance, and social adequacy (Byrne, 1984).

Review of literature: Growing up is a problematic phase for children, as they face exceptional amount of burden inflicted on them by the society (Lukash, 2002). An analytic study (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011) depicts that children talk about their encounters/experiences and their perception of things through their drawings. This makes it important for us to assess what children with special needs experience in their day-to-day life through their drawings. Another study (Onetti, Fernandez-Garcia & Castillo-Rodrigue, 2019) conducted on Self Concept changes of children over time stated that children deal with lower concept due to constant shifts in school and also as they age. This study brings us to the awareness that we need to empower children with substantial psychological and academic self-concept.

Methodology: The data comprises of 38 children of age ranging between 6-12 years belonging to both the genders. It was collected from a reputed private school in Delhi-NCR. The age range of the children made them fall in the group of middle childhood. The study aimed to explore the self-concept of children with special needs in their middle childhood. The objectives were: -

- To assess whether children with special needs in their middle childhood faced a negative or positive self-concept.
- To assess the different predictors of positive or negative self-concept (if found) in children with special needs through their self-portrait drawings.
- To assess whether the children with special needs (CWSN) are able to achieve age-appropriate socio-emotional behaviors.

A hypothesis was made stating that there would be a significant negative Self-Concept seen in young children with special needs.

Results & Conclusion: To assess the self-portrait drawings, we used indicators from the DAP Test, a study by Lukash, 2002 & Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011. The most common indicators that were seen to affect self-concept through children's drawings were omission and distortion, use of erasure, excessive details, Pencil pressure, accentuation, encapsulation, faint lines, surroundings around the person. The interesting observation that made was that some children drew robotic figures, some drew shapes that depicted their face and body. A very different and interesting

factor was seen in a drawing by a boy who drew a crown over his head also another child drew rain and sun together in his painting. A drawing clearly depicted that the child was unsure about how to portray herself so she drew herself in 3 different figures, first being only her face, second her half body and third was her complete self. 18 children out of 38 drew a very small self-portrait which signifies feelings of incompetence, shame, cheese, fear and shame. Another important theme that came to attention was stretched out hands drawn by 22 out of 38 children which depicted feelings of insecurity and need to connect with the environment and others.

Keywords: Special Needs, Children, Adolescents, Self-Concept, Self-Portrait Drawings.

INTRODUCTION

Art as a medium of expression

Art is a voice to an individual's emotional and deep-rooted condition and state. As humans are creative in nature, we learn to express our impulses and desires through different mediums like pleasant music, writing etc. These mediums of expressions for feelings comprise an individuals connect and passion and primarily their inner emotional state. In case of children, the easiest way to express and voice out emotions is through the medium of their drawings. Even the simple strokes made through rough scribbling on paper could depict information that is absent in conversations and difficult to interpret through behaviour (Bengwasan, 2014).

Young children quite often find it difficult to express about concerns that could be bothering them on an emotional level. Non-Verbal expression through the medium of art has proven to be an effective strategy in uncovering, understanding, and analysing the feelings of young children (Lukash, 2002). According to Osler (1999), therapists should listen attentively as and when individuals are communicating about what could possibly be wrong with them. Unfortunately, children quite often find it challenging to express their emotions and adults could display reluctance towards listening. This challenge and inefficiency in communication could create barriers which could have adverse impacts on a child's self-concept.

Reserved, hesitant, impulsive or children with specific disorders such as speech and language difficulties or children who communicate in a language different from the therapist tend to display a good response to exercises designed with the incorporation of art (Klepsch & Logie, 2014). Due to an involvement of innumerable aspects in drawings, it is hypothesized that these easy illustrations could provide an insight into the child's innermost

self. Expression through art can prove to be a beneficial tool for assessing as it is the most routinely and commonly used way for voicing emotions by children. Almost all children enjoy drawing and would love to do so when given a chance to do so (Van Hutton, 1994).

Sketching and painting can be included as an effective tool in a school setup especially with children who display delay in development and developmental difficulties. Drawings could be viewed as being promising indicators of a child's emotions, self-concept, social competency and capabilities, along with other elements of his or her personality (Di Leo, 2015; Malchiodi, 1998).

Children usually tend to sketch and scribble way before they learn any skills to write. It is suitable to suggest that drawing offers the same primary unconscious expression to a child's inner world like the one found in expression through dreams. Subsequently, projective techniques such as drawing that use a similar symbolic language like dreams are helpful enough in having the child voice his/her innermost emotions and state (Piaget, 1951).

Costa (2002) suggested that while a child is engrossed in his/her drawing there is an irresistible shift and projection of the deep-rooted emotional state and psyche of a child to the outer exterior surface reality. His/her aspirations, obsessions, threats and understanding of the world is projected on the sheet with the use of pencils, colours, pens, or other aids. Art could provide children with a chance to voice out and bring to their conscious state of mind, emotions, experiences, and thoughts that were not addressed or understood earlier. It is helpful in letting children use symbolism while they address and interact with their aspirations and most feared thoughts and emotions.

Concept of Self

An individual's self is an understanding of his/her inner world. It is usually formed by interactions with people in the environment which leads an individual to developing strong perceptions about oneself and viewing themselves as either "I" or "Me". An individual tends to form beliefs or apprehensions regarding how others would perceive them in situations and about their general acceptance in the society. This helps them form a sense of oneself which becomes a milestone for their interpretation of oneself and the world in novel or other future situations. Children with special needs could be defined as those who experience a prolonged disability of any form, physical or mental, and it debilitates their capacity to function at their full potential and hampers their regular functioning. Self-Concept can be defined as the outlook, perception and beliefs of an individual attached to his/her abilities, actions, and qualities in life. It is formed based on critical analysis done by an individual about oneself and on his/her innovative ways to behave in each situation. Early in life, children's self-concept and critical analysis of self is majorly based on others perception, acceptance and judgement of them, especially their peers, immediate family and relatives (Neeraja, 2014).

Children with special needs have been vulnerable to innumerable threats that continue to be a reason of worry for all stakeholders responsible for the child's welfare. They continue to make efforts to look for effective intervention strategies to meet the requirements of achieving overall wellness for the child with special needs. Interventions designed for children with special needs usually focus on enhancing their self-concept and are included as a part of their remedial education plan. According to the traditional inferences, self-concept is directly proportional to a better survival rate in life. It becomes important to strengthen the self-concept of children with special needs to increase their opportunities in leading a successful life. Simply, a child who succeeds at developing good feelings about oneself, would perform better at school and other activities (Canfield & Siccone, 1993; Siccone & Canfield, 1993).

The differently abled are commonly perceived as being mere elements for entertainment as

they lack a sense of behaviour that is socially appropriate. These individuals tend to form a negative image about oneself due to exposure to negative situations which are a result of unhealthy negative communications with others. This leads individuals with special needs to believe that they are useless and make them question their own worth. Children with special needs usually are at the receiving end of more negative evaluation and feedback as compared to their peers. Mental health professionals consider enhancing a child's self-concept and self-esteem as a treatment option to alleviate behavioural concerns and improve the child's academic performance and social skills (Sze & Valentin, 2007). Leondari (1993) compared self-concept ratings of normally and low achieving third to sixth graders in regular classes with those students facing academic difficulties and attending special education classes. Findings showed that special class students rated themselves significantly lower than their normally achieving peers on both academic and 16 global self-concept. A similar study Priel and Leshem (1990) indicated that young first- and second grade (6 to 7 years of age) children with Learning Disabilities had lower self-perception in the cognitive and physical competence domain than their normally achieving peers.

Statement of the Problem

The study focuses on an analysis of self-portrait drawings obtained from children and adolescents with special needs to study their self-concept and understand the interpretive factors that suggest their understanding of self, according to the manual of Draw a person test (Kohli, Kaur & Malhotra, 2006) and few studies from relevant review of literature. The study also aims to identify and derive specific themes about the interpretive factors of self-concept in children and adolescents with special needs. The research focuses on deriving an answer to the following research questions:

1. Whether the self-concept of children and adolescents with special needs is positive or negative?
2. What are the interpretive factors of self-concept in self-portrait drawings of children and adolescents with special needs?

3. What are the differences in self-concept of children and adolescents with special needs based on gender?

Methods and Procedure

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The study aimed to explore the self-concept of children with special needs in their middle childhood. The objectives were: -

- To assess whether children with special needs in their middle childhood faced a negative or positive self-concept.
- To assess the different predictors of positive or negative self-concept (if found) in children with special needs through their self-portrait drawings.
- To assess whether the children with special needs (CWSN) are able to achieve age-appropriate socio-emotional behaviors.
- To be able to derive intervention strategies for enhancing self-concept with these children through art.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The current study is qualitative in nature as it focuses on developing an understanding of self-concept of children and adolescents with special needs through their self-portrait drawings. It also aims to evaluate the possibility of interpreting Self-Concept of children with special needs who are in their middle childhood through Draw a person test. Moreover, the current study aimed at assessing gender differences (if any) in positive or negative self-concept amongst children and adolescents with special needs.

The data comprised of 38 children of age ranging between 6-12 years belonging to both the genders. 9 girls and 29 boys participated in the study. It was collected from a reputed private school in Delhi-NCR after receiving an informed consent from the parents of the children and the school authorities. The age range of the children made them fall in the group of middle childhood.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The researchers first obtained permission from the concerned authorities of the school where the children were studying. After receiving necessary permission from the school, the parents and guardians of the children were approached for the necessary consent and approval to work with their children.

After adequate rapport was formed through free-play the children were asked to draw a self-portrait and write 3-5 lines describing themselves on a sheet of paper. This was done under a controlled environmental condition (undisturbed closed child familiar space with appropriate lighting). The drawings were analyzed on the basis of DAP Manual and few studies from the existing literature with the supervision and guidance of a trained art therapist.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INDICATIVE FACTORS

The data was analyzed on the following parameters:

- Size of the figure
- Pencil Pressure
- Stroke and Line quality
- Lack of Details
- Placement
- Use of Erasure
- Shading
- Distortions and Omission
- Head
- Facial Features
- Nose
- Ears
- Chin
- Neck
- Shoulders
- Trunk
- Arms, Hands, and fingers
- Placement of Hands
- Legs
- Feet
- Accentuation: Adding certain words to the drawing
- Encapsulation: The need to draw boundaries around oneself

RESULTS

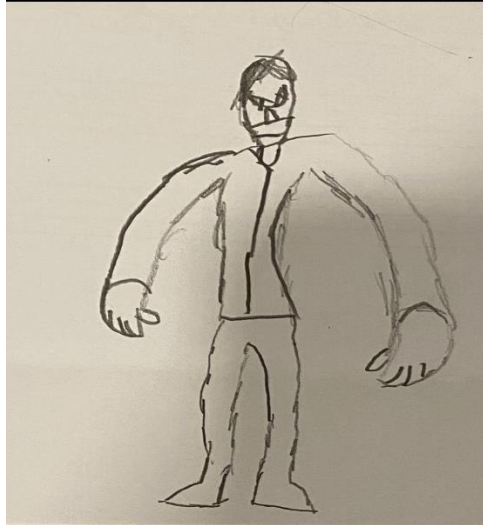
The self-portrait drawings were assessed by the researchers and a trained art therapist based on the above enlisted parameters listed in the DAP Manual and few research studies (Frederick, 2002 & Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011). The results were drawn based on an analysis of self-portrait drawings received from 38 children with special needs.

In the first Parameter (Size of the figure) 23 children (60.5%) (20 Males, 3 Females) drew tiny figures which states Feelings of Inferiority, low self-esteem, inhibition tendencies, restrained, timid and shy

behavior. According to the DAP manual (Kohli, Kaur & Malhotra, 2006) if children draw small or tiny figures, they view themselves as inadequate and small

and their behaviour towards the environment is defined and a result of their sense of inferiority and inadequacy.

Image 1: Self-Portrait of a 9-year-old boy diagnosed with a Learning Disability.



Through the second parameter (Pencil Pressure) it was observed that 16 children (42.1%) used light pencil pressure while

drawing indicating hesitant, timid, indecisive, fearful, inhibited and insecure personality type.

Image 2: Self-Portrait of a 7-year-old girl diagnosed with a Learning Disability.

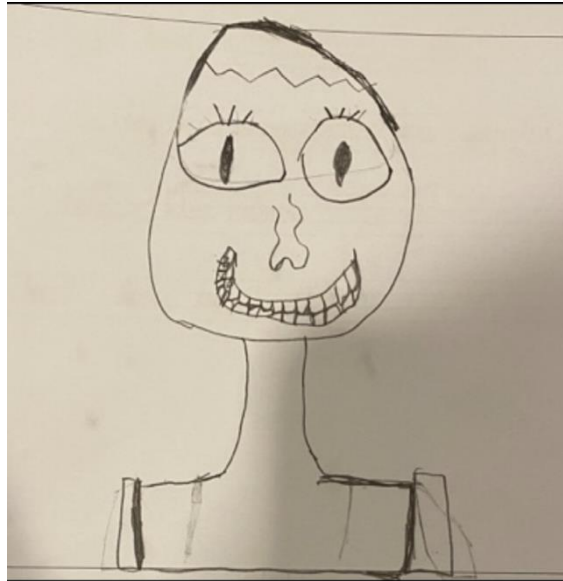


On the third parameter, (Stroke and Line quality) 25 children (65.7%) used long strokes which indicates controlled behavior perhaps inhibition in the extreme, while three of them used a mixture of horizontal movement and long strokes too which suggested fearfulness and protective tendencies. While 10 children drew only horizontal movement lines. 19 children also used shading while drawing which is

often an indicator of anxiety according to the DAP Manual.

Lack of details being the fourth parameter gave us insight on the stress created externally as 15 children (39.4%) lacked details in their drawing. It indicates a feeling of withdrawal.

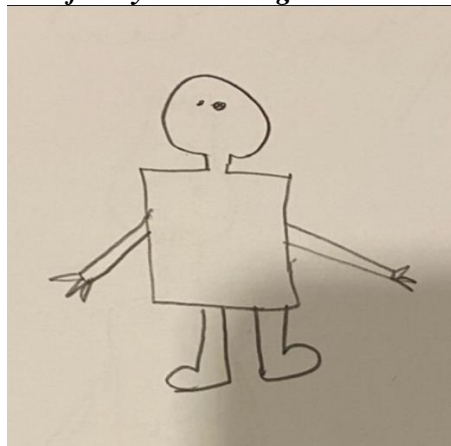
Image 3: Self-Portrait of an 8-year-old boy diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.



The fifth parameter (Placement) offered some very interesting results as 12 children (7 males, 5 girls) (31.5%) drew the figure at the bottom edge of the paper which suggests the need for support associated with feelings of insecurity and low self-assurance, dependency, fear of

independent action, tendency to avoid new experiences. 17 children (44.7%) drew the figure up in the air which is indicative of children having very high standards of achievement for themselves which puts them in a state to work rigorously in order to achieve them.

Image 4: Self-Portrait of a 9-year-old diagnosed with a Learning Disability

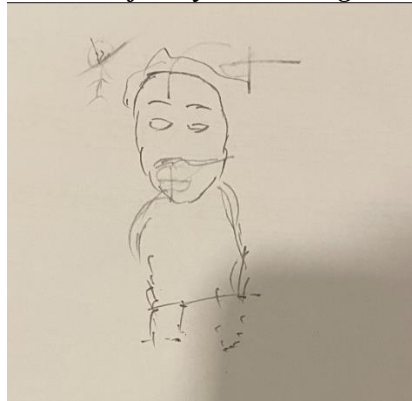


On the sixth parameter (Excessive use of erasure) 19 children (50%) (15 males and 4 girls) used excessive erasure indicating uncertainty, restlessness, indecisiveness, dissatisfaction with self and anxiety. Most of the children erased their entire figure to

redraw which indicated body image issues as well.

The seventh parameter (shading) showed that 19 children (50%) (13 males and 6 girls) did shading which indicated conflict anxiety.

Image 5: Self-Portrait of a 7-year-old diagnosed with Autism.

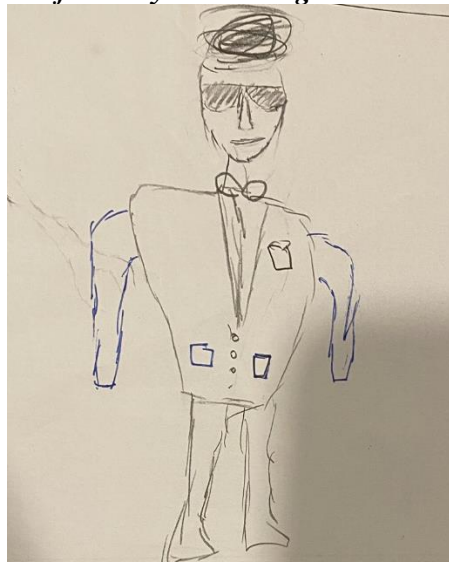


On the next parameter (Omissions and Distortions), 25 children (65.7%) (all boys) showed gross distortions which indicated NEGATIVE SELF-CONCEPT. Sixteen (42.1%) (3 girls) children drew unusually small heads indicating feelings of inadequacy, a feeling of intellectual inadequacy and weak ego conditions. 6 children (15.7%) dimmed out the head and face which is an indication of them being conscious and shy.

On the next parameter (Over emphasis on facial features) 19 children (50%) (4 girls)

paid extra emphasis on facial features indicating over concern with outward appearances and feelings of inadequacy. Seventeen children (44.7%) (4 girls) drew large eyes indicating hypersensitivity to social opinion and suspiciousness. While 8 boys drew very small eyes indicating introversive tendencies and 5 children (2 girls) drew eyes with omitted pupils suggesting inability to cope or communicating.

Image 6: Self Portrait of an 11-year-old diagnosed with a learning disability.



Sixteen children (42.1%) (4 girls) did not include any nose in their drawing indicating shy/withdrawn personality. Nine children (23.6%) (only 1 girl) drew large nose suggesting hypersensitivity to criticism.

Thirty (78.9%) (8 girls) children drew weak chin which indicated feelings of inadequacy or weakness especially in social situations.

Fifteen children (39.4%) (3 girls) omitted a neck in their drawings suggesting impulsivity and a poor connection between

the intellectual life and basic body impulses while 2 boys paid emphasis on neck suggesting the need to control threatening situations.

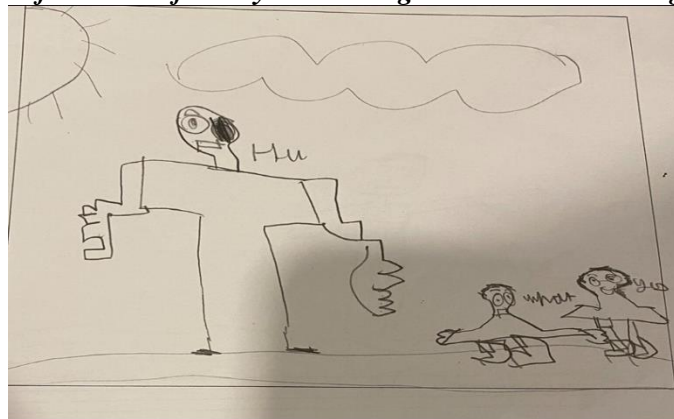
Ten children (26.3%) (3 girls) drew tiny shoulders suggesting feelings of inferiority and 15 children (3 girls) drew broad shoulders suggesting excessive defensiveness and acting out tendencies.

Twenty boys (52.6%) drew small trunks which suggested that there is a denial of drives and feelings of inferiority.

Twenty-five children (65.7%) (4 girls) drew outstretched hands which may point towards feelings of insecurity and need to connect with the environment and a desire for help and affection. 15 children (only 1 girl) omitted fingers suggesting difficulty in interpersonal relationships.

Twenty-one children (55.2%) (3 girls) showed a strong need or striving for autonomy through the long legs they drew.

Image 7: Self-Portrait of an 8-year-old diagnosed with a Learning Disability



Fourteen children (36.8%) (1 girl) omitted feet which suggested loss of autonomy, feelings of helplessness and disturbance, lack of independence and feelings of constriction. While 11 children (7 girls) drew small feet indicating insecurity, constriction or dependence.

Thirteen (34.2%) children drew boundaries around themselves which suggested the need for protection and fear of social isolation.

Results of 2 children diagnosed with Autism (2 boys) showed that they felt dependent, constricted, and a fear of isolation along with negative Self-Concept.

There was no major difference seen in feelings of children depending on their condition. But boys displayed a more affected concept of self as compared to the girls. While 6 out of 9 girls were seen facing conflict anxiety and 8 of them were seen having feelings of inadequacy or weakness especially in social situations.

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed at assessing whether children with special needs have a negative or positive self-concept. The results of the study confirmed a negative self-concept of children with special needs. As per literature, art has proven to be an effective tool to understand the inner state of a child as they find it hard to

express through verbal mode of communication. According to a study conducted by Leondari (1993) self-concept ratings of normally and low achieving third to sixth graders in regular classes with those students facing academic difficulties and attending special education classes were compared. Findings showed that special class students rated themselves significantly lower than their normally achieving peers on both academic and 16 global self-concept. It becomes increasingly important for mental health practitioners to develop effective and individualized intervention strategies that cater to the needs of these children according to their personal needs.

According to a meta-analysis (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001), counselling-based interventions are the most effective for children with special needs in their middle childhood especially for the ones diagnosed with learning disabilities. School Counsellors could develop individualised interventions for these children that focus on counselling that could help them have a better sense of self and enhanced self-concept.

The main themes that emerged out of this study were feelings of inferiority, hypersensitivity to criticism and social opinion, Negative Self-Concept, feelings of

insecurity, feelings of inadequacy, defensiveness, over-protective feelings for self, fear of social isolation, desire for help and affection. According to a study Byrne (1984) concluded that girls generally display lower global self-concept than boys but score higher than boys in the academic domain of self-concept. On the contrary in the current study, boys scored higher in Negative Self-Concept as compared to girls which was seen on the parameter of Omissions and Distortions. Pertaining to the given scenario according to the results there is a need to devise efficient interventions to help these children work on their feelings. Also, the results showed a need for these children to feel well-connected to their environment and receive adequate amount of help and affection.

REFERENCES

- Bengwasan, P. D. (2014). Interpretive Aspects of Human Figure Drawings of Abused Children.
- Bliss, M. *William Osler: A Life in Medicine*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Byrne, B. (1984). The general/academic self-concept nomological network: A review of construct validation research. *Review of Educational Research*, 54, 427-456. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/00346543054003427>
- Canfield, J. , & Siccone, F. (1993). 101 ways to develop student self-esteem (vol. 1). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Costa, J. G. (2002). Analysis of Cognitive and Emotional Development in Children's Drawings. A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of Psychology. Saint Louis University. Unpublished
- Di Leo, J. H. (2015). *Children's drawings as diagnostic aids*. Routledge.
- Elbaum, B., & Vaughn, S. (2001). School-based interventions to enhance the self-concept of students with learning disabilities: A meta-analysis. *The Elementary School Journal*, 101(3), 303-329. <https://doi.org/10.1086/499670>
- Farokhi, M., & Hashemi, M. (2011). The analysis of children's drawings: Social, emotional, physical, and psychological aspects. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 30, 2219-2224. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.433>
- Grolnick, W. S., & Ryan, R. M. (1990). Self-perceptions, motivation, and adjustment in children with learning disabilities: A multiple group comparison study. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 23(3), 177-184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002221949002300308>
- Hart, D., & Damon, W. (1986). Developmental trends in self-understanding. *Social Cognition*, 4(4), 388-407. <https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.1986.4.4.388>
- Klepsch, M., & Logie, L. (2014). *Children draw and tell: An introduction to the projective uses of children's human figure drawing*. Routledge.
- Leondari, A. (1993). Comparability of self-concept among normal achievers, low achievers and children with learning difficulties. *Educational Studies*, 19(3), 357-371.
- Lukash, F. N. (2002). Children's Art as a helpful Index of Anxiety and Self-esteem with plastic surgery. *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, 109(6), 1777-1786.
- Malchiodi, C. A. (1998). *Understanding children's drawings*. Guilford Press.
- Minke, K. M., Bear, G. G., Deemer, S. A., & Griffin, S. M. (1996). Teachers' experiences with inclusive classrooms: Implications for special education reform. *The Journal of Special Education*, 30(2), 152-186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002246699603000203>
- Morvitz, E., & Motta, R. W. (1992). Predictors of self-esteem: The roles of parent-child perceptions, achievement, and class placement. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 25(1), 72-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002221949202500111>
- Neeraja, P. (2014). Assessment of self-concept among children with special needs. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(3), 125-133.
- Onetti-Onetti, W., Chinchilla-Minguet, J. L., Martins, F. M., & Castillo-Rodriguez, A. (2019). Self-concept and physical activity: Differences between high

school and university students in Spain and Portugal. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01333>

- Piaget, J. (1951). 6. Principal Factors Determining Intellectual Evolution from Childhood to Adult Life. In *Organization and pathology of thought* (pp. 154-175). Columbia University Press.
- Priel, B., & Leshem, T. (1990). Self-perceptions of first-and second-grade children with learning disabilities. *Journal of learning disabilities*, 23(10), 637-642.
- Siccone, F. , & Canfield, J. (1993). 101 ways to develop student self-esteem and responsibility (vol. 2). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Stone, C. A. & May, A. L. (2002) The accuracy of academic self-evaluations in adolescents with learning disabilities, *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 35(4), 370–383 (2) (PDF) *Self-Constructs of students with learning disabilities and their normally achieving peers*.
- Sze, S., & Valentin, S. (2007). Self-concept and children with disabilities. *Education*, 127(4), 552-558.
- Van Hutton, V. (1994). *House-Tree-Person and Draw-A-Person as measures of abuse in children: A quantitative scoring system*. Psychological Assessment Resources.