
Brief Reports

A Study of Self-Concept, Anxiety, and Security of Children in Gifted, French Immersion, and Regular Classes

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

There are now many options available for children in the Ontario school system. These special programmes definitely have the best interests of the children at heart and are concerned with providing the richest education in accordance with the pupils' needs, abilities, and interests. One very successful programme is French Immersion which has existed in the Halton Region in Southern Ontario since 1978 in two different formats: early Immersion which begins in grade one and late Immersion beginning in grade seven. Both are what is termed 50% immersion in that the children learn half of their subject in French and half in English. There are no prerequisites for entry into the programme and applications are accepted on a first-come basis.

Another expanding programme is the development of self-contained classes for pupils defined as gifted. For this programme, children must be identified by established criteria of intelligence and creativity. Both of these programmes may be considered to a certain extent elitist, and some criticism has been leveled at them for this reason. The argument has been voiced that the majority, the rest of the children, may be suffering in over-crowded classrooms and getting less attention as a result.

This study, therefore, set out to look at the way the children in these two groups, French Immersion and gifted, compare with each other and with the children in regular classes with regard to self-concept, security and anxiety.

METHODOLOGY

Through the co-operation of the Halton Board of Education, a total of 134 children were tested in six classes in four schools, fairly representative of the schools in the region. The three tests used were all standardized instruments and were administered in the classroom by the researcher according to specified directions.

The test for anxiety was the most simple and was called the "How-I-Feel Questionnaire" or the Strait-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children A-Trait Scale (Speilberger, 1973). It measures general trait anxiety, or relatively stable individual differences in anxiety proneness. The second test, the North York Self Concept Inventory (Rowan, 1985) consists of

30 questions to do mostly with school or with interpersonal interaction. The third test, *The Story of Jimmy*, or the Institute of Child Study Security Test (Grapko, 1957), is a booklet which contains a story about a boy named Jimmy who has fifteen choices to make throughout the day. Each little scenario is described and children have to pick five choices in the order they feel Jimmy would make them. The test is based upon the rather complex security theory in which security is defined as a dynamic concept implying change, growth, and integration, and an acceptance of the consequences of one's actions.

FINDINGS

On the whole, the mean scores for the combined groups were close to the expected norms. There may be a slight trend observable in the anxiety and self-concept scores as the groups line up in order of intelligence, showing the greatest anxiety and the poorest self-concept in the gifted group, and the least anxiety and best self-concept in the regular group. Taken together, these scores may be seen as directional but are not statistically significant.

Means on the North York Self Concept Inventory (Rowan, 1985) for the French Immersion and regular programmes were slightly above given norms, and slightly below for the gifted group. When boys and girls norms are considered separately, however, a wider range is observed. In all three groups the boys scored higher than the girls, but only in the gifted group was the mean score of the girls noticeably below the boys and below the expected average.

As would be expected, there was a very high inverse correlation between the anxiety scale and the self-concept inventory. The same pattern emerged from the group means showing the gifted children to be most anxious, followed by those in French Immersion and those in the regular programme, who were least anxious. This increase in anxiety corresponding to increase in intelligence was not expected since other data using this same test has shown a significant negative correlation with Verbal I.Q. (cited in test manual). Again the really significant finding comes from a comparison of boys' and girls' mean scores. The girls scored higher than the boys in their classes in all cases, but the significant difference occurs in the case of the gifted girls who were by far the most anxious group. These girls were not only significantly more anxious than their male counterparts, but were also significantly more anxious than the girls in both of the other two types of classes.

Unlike the other two tests, the mean scores of the security test, *The Story of Jimmy* (Grapko, 1957), did not correspond to any order of intelligence. The children in the gifted programme did obtain the highest mean score, but then came the regular group and lastly those in French Immersion. All means were below the standardized norms

TABLE 1
Combined Group Means

<i>Class Type Sample Size</i>		<i>Anxiety</i>		<i>Self-Concept</i>		<i>Security</i>
Regular N=41	Class	34.15	Class	21.9	Class	75.35
	Boys	32.9	Boys	22.2	Boys	73.4
	Girls	35.5	Girls	21.4	Girls	77.71
French Immersion N=51	Class	35.9	Class	21.6	Class	74.29
	Boys	35.4	Boys	22.0	Boys	70.1
	Girls	36.4	Girls	21.2	Girls	77.9
Gifted N=42	Class	36.95	Class	20.4	Class	79.3
	Boys	34.6	Boys	21.7	Boys	77.26 ²
	Girls	41.6 ¹	Girls	18.5	Girls	82.9 ³

¹ The girls in the gifted groups showed higher anxiety levels than the boys in the gifted group ($p < .01$), and also higher anxiety level than the girls in both the regular group and the French Immersion group ($p < .05$).

² The boys in the gifted group showed higher levels of security than the boys in the French Immersion group ($p < .05$).

³ The girls in the gifted group showed higher levels of security than both the girls in the regular group and the girls in the French Immersion group ($p < .05$).

except those for the gifted girls and boys. Since standardized norms are listed separately for boys and girls, comparisons were made primarily between groups of the same sex. In this case the scores of the gifted girls were significantly higher than the scores of the girls of the other two groups. The mean score for the gifted boys was also significantly higher than boys in French Immersion but not than that of the boys in the regular classes.

The lack of correlation between the security test and the other two tests is perplexing but may lie in the definition of security which is seen as a "willingness to accept consequences for a decision or behaviour." Apparently the French Immersion students as a group are slightly less secure in this sense of the word than are the other children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Teachers of children in French Immersion programmes might be able to help them, through discussion and example, to accept the fact that it is all right to make mistakes and discourage them from being defensive or rationalizing and blaming others. The children should be encouraged to

take initiative but in a way that does not put pressure on them and minimizes fear of failure.

The anxiety and poor self-concept of the girls in the self-contained gifted classes pose a more serious problem. (It should be noted that this study does not say that the classes cause these girls to be more anxious, only that the girls in those classes are more anxious.) Teachers should do all they can to boost self-confidence and minimize stress in their female students, to make their ability a source of enjoyment for them rather than a source of anxiety. Emphasis should definitely be on co-operation rather than on competition. The teachers might be helped in this aim by counsellors working with the group as a whole and with those individuals in greatest need.

Psychologists involved in assessment and placement should be aware of the possible stress to girls of being placed in a self-contained gifted class. (The low number of girls in such classes may indicate that this is already being taken into consideration.) In this author's opinion the answer does not lie in keeping them out of the programmes, rather the contrary. Surely it is more desirable to approach the problem positively with teachers, counsellors, and parents working together to reduce pressure. This is not an easy job as no doubt part of the cause lies in society's attitudes towards bright women and it is perhaps true that to live up to one's assessed ability is more likely to cause anxiety in females than in males.

Despite this disturbing note, the findings of the study are largely positive. For the most part, the children in these special programmes seem well adjusted. Moreover, the existence of these special programmes has apparently not diminished the sense of self worth of the children in regular classes.

References

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Joel Klein at the Institute of Child Study, for his supervision, and John Cholvat, Research Officer for the Halton Board of Education for his advice and access to the Halton School System. Thanks also to Dr. Grapko for use of his test *The Story of Jimmy*.