SELF-CONCEPT AND SELF-EVALUATION IN THE TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: In this article I'll present theoretical concepts and empirical results of self-concept and self-esteem of the children in transition from primary school to lower secondary education (LSE). Through the evidences from research literature, this article, aims to provide answers to such questions: How and what aspects of self-concept and self-esteem of children develop and change during childhood and adolescence? Is there a correlation between levels of self-concept and self-assessment that the child has for him and his academic achievements? Why is it important to maintain high levels of self-concept and self-esteem of the child for the life in general, and for the school life in particular? Studies of the last two decades have shown that changes in self-concept and self-esteem of the child are strongly correlated with pupils' academic achievements. Keeping positive levels of self-concept and self-esteem, would facilitate the difficulties of the child's adjustment at the new school.

Keywords: School transition, self-concept, self-esteem, impact, lower secondary education.

INTRODUCTION

It has been paid great attention to children's transition from primary to lower secondary education (AMU), energy and desire by many researchers and university research teams, not only to understand the process, but also to determine the causes and factors affecting to the performance of children in the process. Because of the many changes that occur simultaneously in a child's life, the transition to high school is unique, unrepeatable. Changes that accompany this period include: changes in the learning environment, in the nature and structure of junior high school (Kvaslund, 2000; cited in Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007; Sutherland, Yee, McNess, Harris, 2010; James, Davison, See & Knowles, 2010); changes in pupils' academic achievement (McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow, 2004; Cox & Kennedy, 2008; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Roeser, Eccles & Samerof, 2000); changes in the child's social relationships, as, for example, relationships with teachers (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan & MacIver, 1993; Cocklin, 1999), in the relationships with peers (Serbin & Bukowski, 2006; Graham & Hill, 2002); and not to forget the physical, physiological and emotional changes that occur in early adolescence (Callagan, Clark & Kellough, 1995; Kroger, 2006; Barrat, 1998).

SELF-CONCEPT and SELF-ESTEEM

Undoubtedly, the age of child during the transition from primary school to lower secondary education (LSE), is an important index, which affects other indicators. At this age the child has entered into early adolescence. The eary adolescence period is one marked by many changes in biological and psychological characteristics and in relations with peers, teachers, etc. (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005, p. 117).

"The biological and social changes associated with puberty may also be responsible for some of these changes in young adolescents' self-perceptions" (Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991, p. 552).

But despite the great importance that these changes have for the young adolescents' live, I will not dwell on the biological and cognitive changes occurring in adolescence. In this session, I will focus on the child's value system, which is in the centre of the development in early adolescence. This value system is composed of self-esteem, self-concept and identity (Susman & Rogel, 2004; Harter, 1999; cited in Wigfield, Lutz & Wagner, 2005, f. 112-113). In literature self-evaluation and self-concept are sometimes used in place of each other, but it should be said that they do not represent the same thing, although there are multiple definitions for each of them.

Self-concept is a complex network of interactive self-perceptions that a person holds about his beliefs to the adoption of certain behaviors and to have some personal attributes with cultural value (Gresham, Eliot & Evans-Fernandez, 1993; cited in Christensen, 2007, f. 11). It is classified as a cognitive science that organizes abstract and concrete views about yourself and controls the processing of information of the self-belonging (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1983; cited in Man, Hosman, Schaalma & Vries, 2004, p. 357). Or, more succinctly: self-concept relates to individual beliefs and estimates about characteristics, roles, skills and his relationships (Wigfield, Lutz & Wagner, 2005, f. 113). Other concepts that are mentioned in the literature as self-image and self-perception, are equivalent to the self-concept (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma & Vries, 2004, p. 357).

While *self-esteem* is the feeling that one individual has for him\herself or values as a person. It is the way you see yourself and how you feel about things you do (Wigfield, Lutz & Wagner, 2005, f. 113; Nemouros from kidshealth.com). Self-esteem is the evaluation and affective dimension of self-concept and it is considered the equivalent of self-belonging and self-value (Harter, 1999; cited in Mann, Hosman, Schaalma & Vries, 2004, p. 357).

Identity is the conscious description of an individual of who he is. If you want to know the identity of a person, ask the person to describe himself (Chapter 15, f. 317). Identity is a broader term that self-concept and self-esteem and refers to the individual's feelings about himself and his psychological reality that includes several different beliefs and attitudes (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005; cited in Wigfield, Lutz & Wagner, 2005). The formation of identity involves not only the success in activities such as: school achievement, social relationships with others, career interests and choices, the exploration in the different roles, but it also involves sexual orientation, gender and ethnic factors (Harter, 1999; Marcia, 1980; Waterman, 1982; cited in Wigfield, Lutz & Wagner, 2005). For example, a person who has a religious identity with important content and purpose, it is very clear for him what to do, what to assess and how to behave (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012, f. 73).

Types of self-concept

Self-concept is composed of real self, ideal self and public self.

Real self is how you see yourself. This could be real or not. People can see themselves much better than they actually are and in contrary they may perceive too mach flaw and weakness, thus having a negative self-image of themselves. For example, a teenage boy may perceive himself to be stupid and not likeable to society, when in fact he is very nice and kind. Or, often, teenage girls believe they are overweight when in reality they are slim (Rogers, 1959).

Ideal self is what a person would like to be, such as a good, moral, and well-respected person. The conflict that sometimes occurs between the real self and the ideal self can positively affect if we motivate a person to improve, in order to approximate the ideal image of himself, or it could be the cause to experience anxiety and danger, when ideal self is far away and is not accessible to realized by the person (Capter 15, f. 317).

While *public self* is what a person thinks about what others think of him, and public self influences the real and ideal self. When these three components of self-concept are in resonance with each other, then the self-concept and mental health of the person are positive (Capter 15, f. 317).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-CONCEPT and SELF-ASSESSMENT FROM INFANCY TO ADOLESCENCE

Harter (1990) explained that educational and development researchers, often measure self-concept with the competencies or skills of the child to do things. Young children have developed self-concept and have clearly expressed it when they show their skills in different areas (cited in Wigfield, Lutz & Wagner, 2005, p. 113-114). But at what age children are able to self report their self-concept? To measure the self-concept of the children, researchers are focused primarily on children's abilities to describe and to rank themselves through multiple dimensions. Marsh, Barnes, Cairns, & Tidman, (1984) have argued that children are able to report various dimensions of self-concept since they are in second grade of primary school (cited in Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith , 2012, p. 76).

By the transition from primary to lower secondary education, students' self-concept decreases. The reason for this decline is the different levels of perception of children's self-concept. When they are younger, the self-concept that they have for themselves, is much more positive than the powers they really have, which means that they overestimate their abilities. According to researchers, this overestimation happens because the children have

not developed enough critical assessment of themselves and they are not able to integrate information from multiple sources. Growing up, pupils understand better how their skills are viewed by others, being so more careful in their self-perception. During the transition to secondary education, levels of self-concept of children are lower than in childhood. According to Harter's opinion, it passes by the start of secondary education, where adolescents' self-concept begins to rise gradually (Harter, 1999; cited in Manning, 2007, p. 11).

The researchers believe that self-esteem with all its components, is not fully developed in early childhood. General self-esteem as the self-concept, is fully developed in the middle childhood. Young children are able to judge their skills in some specific areas, but they do not have the ability to make general judgments about their self-value (Harter, 1999; cited in Bos, Muris, Mulkens & Schaalma , 2006, p. 4).

Who can influence in the development of positive self-concept of children and how this can be realized?

The crucial role for the development of infants' positive self-esteem, belongs to parents, which promote self-esteem of their children by encouraging them to take initiatives (to speak, to crawl), congratulating for every good action, smiling and proudly watching. With the growth of the child, the circle and contacts with others expand. Now, other characters enter on stage, as peers, educators, teachers, trainers, orienting the child to do useful things for him\her self. All these people help the child to see himself in a positive manner, boost self-confidence that he\she can succeed even when things are going in the wrong way (Nemouros, kidshealth.org).

When children enter in adolescence (this is the age when they start secondary education), self-esteems become more visible, more separated and some not so important issues in childhood, begin to take importance, as for example the influence of peers, romantic relationships or job competencies (Harter, 2003; cited in Bos, Muris, Mulkens & Schaalma, 2006, p. 4). In addition, another reason that makes a difference in self-esteem among adolescents in this period, is also the importance of peer approval. This index together with parenting style becomes an important predictor of self-esteem in adolescence. It is very important what others think about the person and children catch more easily the opinion that others have for them. For example, the thoughts that people who care for children and other adults with influence on them, have for them (Leary & Mac Donald, 2003; cited in Bos, Muris, Mulkens & Schaalma, 2006, p. 4).

Literature has defined the characteristics of parenting that strongly influence the development of child's self-esteem. The opportunity to build positive and high levels of self-esteem, is too large at parents who are approving, nurturing and responsive. While disapproving, uninterested and unresponsive parents, adversely affect and may break down the child's self-esteem levels (Bos, Muris, Mulkens & Schaalma, 2006, p. 4).

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-CONCEPT IN THE CHILD'S LIFE

What positive self-esteem and self-concept develops in children? All children have a positive self-esteem for themselves. To develop this further, it helps kids keep their heads up, they feel proud of themself, urge to try new things and add confidence in themself. Through positive self-esteem, the child develops a high self-esteem for himself, and in this way, others begin to have respect for him; it helps children to be objective and choose healthy alternatives for their mind and body (Nemouros, kidshealth.org).

Positive feelings of self-esteem affect in the growth of children's confidence and in their academic success, for example, enhance the ability to read (Coopersmith, 1967, Marcus & Nurius, 1986, cited in Mann and tj., 2004, p. 359). Dominant strongest predictor of happiness is seen to be self-esteem (Furnham & Cheng, 2000), which together with self-concept and identity are among the key elements of mental health. Our welfare, mental well-being, adjusment, happiness, success and sadisfaction, are strongly associated with positive self-esteem. Even healing some serious diseases, depends heavily on positive self- esteem (Chang & Mackenzie, 1998; cited in Mann and tj., 2004, p. 359).

Whereas self-concept is very important for the person, that his happiness and success in life depend on it. As we highlighted above, self-concept can be positive when people believe in themselves, set goals that can be achieved and self-improved. Several times people with positive self-concept, may also give up some life habits and choose alternatives that preserve their health, for example, when people quit of drinking, smoking (Chapter 15, p. 317). During the transition to Junior High School, promoting a high self-concept of young adolescents, increases academic and life success (Manning, 2007, p. 11).

THE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL TRANSITIONS IN SELF-CONCEPT AND SELF-ESTEEM OF PUPILS

Outcomes from the research literature clearly show that the entry of children in early adolescence, which coincides with the transition of children from primary to lower secondary education, self-esteem and self-concept of children decrease. Studies of the last two decades have shown that changes in self-concept and self-esteem of the child are strongly correlated with changes in student academic achievements (Marsh, 1990; Ssu-Kuang, Ju-Chen, Fang-Ming & Sunny, 2013; Gniewosz, Eccles & Noack, 2011). According to the researchers, the students at risk for low self-concept and for its negative consequences, are those experiencing strong academic difficulties (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001; cited in Christensen, 2007).

Evidence about changes in self-concept of students in various skills, have brought studies by Eccles et al., (1989), Wigfield et al., (1991), Jacobs et al., (2002), which have reported decreasing self-esteem of pupils immediately after school transition.

Eccles, Wigfield, Flanagan, Miller, Reuman, & Yee (1989) aimed to study the self-concept of pupils about their skills in two major subjects: English and Maths, and how it develops during the transition to Junior High School. The same interviewed students twice in sixth grade and twice in seventh grade showed that beliefs in their English and Maths abilities, decreased during the transition (cited in Eccles & Wigfield, 2000, p. 155).

The study conducted by Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley (1991), expanded fields to measure the academic self-perception of children not only in English and Maths, but also in social and sports activities, as well as on self-evaluation. The large number of the study population (N=1850), allowed researchers to make significant generalizations regarding academic self-perception and self-esteem of pupils during the transition to junior high school. Pupils completed the questionnaires twice a year (in spring and winter of the grade 6th and 7th). Results of the study showed that children's self-esteem was lower immediately after the transition, which means in the end of the first semester of 7th grade. This self-esteem, although growing in 7th grade, showed lower levels of self-esteem that these students have had in the 6th grade before the transition. While beliefs about pupils' abilities in Maths, English, and social activities, strongly declined between the end of 6th grade and first semester of 7th grade, but the perception of social skills increased during 7th grade. Perceptions about sport activities decreased during the transition from grade 6 to 7. Like Maths' skills, as well as sports' skills decreasing all the time. Some of the reasons for these declines in academic self-perceptions, were attributed to the differences between environments of primary school and junior high school, by the researchers.

The study undertaken by Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield (2002), who examined changes in beliefs and values of the competence of children from classes 1 to 12, had the same objective but with a much wider range of school years. The findings supported the results of previous studies, concluding that there was a decline in Math, Language Arts and Sports competencies. The strongest decline in Language Arts was marked during the elementary school years, and later it have had slight decreases; declines in Math competencies were similar at all times, while the largest decreases in Sport activities was recorded during the high school years (cited in Wigfield & Tonks, 2002, p. 60).

Toking & Watt (2003) aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a transition program to self-concept of students in grade 7, by comparing two groups of students: one group was included in the program (No = 47 girls) while the other was not (No = 76 girls). Results indicated that the transition program did not increase student's self-concept levels. Thus, students who continued Junior High School in the same building where they had finished elementary school, had highest self-concept in school competencies and social acceptance than the new students to the school, immediately after the transition. Measurements, which were repeated after 5 months of transition, (in the middle of the academic school year) indicated again that self-concept for social acceptance and academic competencies reached even higher levels than the first measurements. The researchers explained that the maintainance high levels of self-concept in 7th grade, occurred because of the silence that students felt in familiar surroundings and known people for them. While physical appearance, behavior and self-value did not mark statistical differences between those who continued in the same school and those transferred to another school. Perhaps these factors of self-concept do not present dependence from known environments and peer influences.

The different school environments that children found passing from one school to another, complicated the adaption of the children at Junior High School (Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007). School transition issues plus students' cultural and ethnic factor, and comparison of students with different cultural backgrounds, has been the object of the study of Graham & Hill (2003) in the UK. Results of the study showed some differences between the two-thirds of the children in seventh grade, who identified themselves as white, and one third of students who were of Pakistani Muslim background. Despite the fact that ethnic minority showed a generally positive attitude towards the transition from grade seven of elementary to grade eight of secondary school, and despite the fact that the anxiety of starting a new school disappeared after almost a month, students reported other difficulties. Thus, "about one in ten children with Muslim faith indicated that their school did not allow them to

follow their religious beliefs as they wished (e.g. not being able to pray at the appropriate time)". Other difficulties were changes of ethnicity, religion, school dimension, behavior, dressing, the lack of fluency in communication in English language with white peers, also with teachers.

Beside the changes that education researchers have found between environments of primary and secondary school, other factors such as cultural background, socio-economic status, ethnicity, etc., students bring with them into the classroom, and their combination, are seen as risky contexts in school transition (Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007, p. 17). For examination of these risky factors and their impact on students' self-esteem, a study was undertaken by Rhodes, Roffman, Reddy, & Frederiksen (2004), which measured the interactions between individual and context variables and effects they had in initial self-esteem and its performance during the junior high school years. This 3 year long-lasting study involving a large number of students (No=1804), used Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) techniques to measure students' self-esteem. Results indicated that the interactions between race, social class, socio-economic status of the school and contextual congruity were found to be influential. According to Rhodes et al., (2004) young people with low incomes consistently experienced lowest self-esteem levels and the sharpest declines during the middle school years. Social disagreements were the main cause of such loss.

CONCLUSIONS

School transitions strongly influence not only in the outer issues of the student, which include educational challenges, academic, organizational, geographical and cultural differences, but also in the internal issues of the students, which include individual changes that occur within the child during and after the transition. One of these individual internal changes is self-esteem and self-concept that student has for himself and for his achievements.

Sometimes in literature, self-assessment and self-concept are used in place of each other, but they do not represent the same thing. Children are fully responsible to report on multiple dimensions of self-esteem and self-concept when they reach middle childhood. The studies bring evidences of a strong correlation between the transition and students' self-esteem and self-concept, highlighting the decline of both these indicators during the transition from primary to Junior High School.

Maintaining a high and positive students' self-esteem and self-concept, impact increasing children's confidence and their academic success; makes students feel proud of themselves, encourages them try new things; develops a high self-esteem for themselves, and in this way, others begin to have respect for them; ensures optimum mental health, maintaining a mental wel-being, adjusment, happiness, success and sadisfaction, even curing some serious diseases; helps children to be objective and choose healthy alternatives for their mind and body.

Therefore the task of teachers, parents, policy makers in education, education researchers, etc., is to build school environments, curriculums, and transition programs that help students maintain higher levels of self-esteem and their self-concept.

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