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Self-concept and academic achievement: Slovenia and France

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Abstract

According to research evidence, self-concept and academic achievement are mutually interdependent. Some investigations also found national differences concerning the relationship between academic success and self-concept. In the present study, we tested the hypothesis that academic achievement affects different components of self-concept. Further, we investigated the possible influence of nationality (Slovenia, France) in modifying the relationship between academic achievement and self-concept. The results of two-factor (academic achievement \times nationality) analyses of variance and discriminant analyses showed significant correlations between academic achievement and various indices of self-concept, which varied in a nationality-dependent fashion. The French subjects exceeded Slovenians in some domains of self-concept (i.e. verbal, academic, relations with same sex peers, relations with parents, religion and spirituality, and general self-concept), while Slovenian subjects exceeded French subjects in the domain of problem solving and creativity. There was no significant difference between both national samples in self-esteem. Also, the French subjects exceeded Slovenian pupils in general academic achievement. The results were interpreted on the grounds of theoretical expectations related to the formation of self-concept and academic achievement, as well as on the basis of national differences in the school system and personality structure. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Self-concept; Self-esteem; Academic achievement; Academic success; Cross-cultural differences; Education; School system

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1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years, teachers and researchers have become increasingly interested in the role of adolescents' self-concept in their success in institutional education. Numerous psychological studies have shown that the formation of a stable and a positive self-concept is one of the major developmental challenges of adolescence (Keltikangas-Järvinen, 1990; Watkins, McCreary, Juhasz, Walker & Janvlaitiene, 1995). Undoubtedly, the school, as a very fundamental agent of socialisation, has an important influence on the development of self-concept at the age of adolescence.

1.1. Self-concept

Self-concept as a theoretical term has both numerous synonyms and definitions. In the literature, it is also identified sometimes as self-schema (Cross & Markus, 1994; Markus, 1977; Markus & Wurf, 1987), self-representation (Cross & Markus, 1994), self-image (Offer, Ostrov, Howard & Atkinson, 1988), self-perception (Evans & Poole, 1991), self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and self-evaluation, for example. Broadly defined, self-concept consists of our perceptions of ourselves (Shavelson & Bolus, 1982). According to Burns (1979), self-concept is a psychological entity which includes our feelings, evaluations, and attitudes, as well as descriptive categories of ourselves. It is manifested outwardly by our behavioral and personality traits and inwardly by how we feel about ourselves and the world around us (Maccoby, 1980). As a psychological whole, it has an effect on one's particular self-perceptions and on the perceptions of other people. It also regulates social cognition, academic achievement, attitudes to school, etc. (Keltikangas-Järvinen, 1990). It could be further concluded that self-concept is a cognitive generalisation about the self (Cross & Markus, 1994), which mostly includes self-descriptions of neutral values. Alternatively, the evaluative and emotional generalisations about the self could be defined as self-esteem (Lamovec, 1994). According to Rosenberg, self-esteem is a positive or negative attitude of an individual towards himself. It is '... closely connected to feeling of life satisfaction ...' (Rosenberg, 1985, p. 212).

Self-concept researchers have long been interested in whether the structure of self-concept is mono- or multidimensional. Shavelson and Bolus (1982) developed a model which has 'undergone the most rigorous examination in both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs,' (Byrne & Shavelson, 1982 p. 474). Their basic hypothesis was that the structure of self-concept is multidimensional and hierarchical. General self-concept is at the highest and broadest level of the hierarchy. On the next level beneath, it splits into conceptions about self in academic and non-academic areas. These areas are further divided into corresponding subdomains; for example, English, History, peers, self-concepts and significant others. Finally, at the most basic level, the model contains specific evaluations of behaviour in defined situations.

In 1984, the Self-Description Questionnaire was constructed based on Shavelson's model, as a psychodiagnostic device designed to evaluate different areas of self-concept (Marsh & O'Neill, 1984). This instrument, specially designed for assessing adolescents, contains the following self-concept areas: (1) mathematics, (2) verbal, (3) academic, (4) problem solving/creativity, (5) physical abilities/sports, (6) physical appearance, (7) relations with same sex peers, (8) relations with opposite sex peers, (9) relations with parents, (10) religion, (11) honesty/reliability, (12) emotional stability/security, and (13) general self-concept.

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