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Original article

Role of parental emotional support in illusion of scholastic incompetence

Rôle du soutien émotionnel parental dans l'illusion d'incompétence scolaire

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Self-perceptions of competence are involved in motivational processes explaining that although pupils' capacities are comparable, their academic achievement differs greatly. In general, pupils with an illusion of scholastic incompetence exhibit a set of negative characteristics concerning their academic functioning.

Objective. – This article seeks to better understand the links between emotional support from parents and children's under-evaluation of their own scholastic competence.

Method. – Self-reports from 626 pupils in Grades 4 and 5 (mean age: 10 years, 8 months) and one of their parents were analysed.

Results. – Pupils with an illusion of incompetence perceive the emotional support provided by their parents as less available and less unconditional. This difference is not echoed in their parents' own report of the emotional support they think they give their child. However, parents of children with an illusion of incompetence do report reacting to their children's actions with criticism and disapproval more often than other parents.

Conclusion. – The quality of parental emotional support as perceived by the children predicts the bias they have when evaluating their own scholastic competence. Their parents' perception also predicts this bias, albeit more modestly.

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R É S U M É

Les perceptions de compétence se retrouvent au cœur du processus motivationnel qui explique que malgré des capacités comparables des élèves peuvent obtenir des résultats scolaires qui diffèrent grandement. On associe à l'illusion d'incompétence scolaire des caractéristiques nuisant au fonctionnement et à la réussite des élèves. Cet article s'intéresse à la relation entre le soutien émotionnel parental et la sous-évaluation des compétences scolaires. Nous avons interrogé séparément, 626 élèves de 4^e et 5^e années du primaire (âge moyen : dix ans et huit mois) ainsi qu'un de leurs parents. Nos résultats indiquent que les élèves ayant une illusion d'incompétence perçoivent une moins grande disponibilité et une moins grande inconditionnalité du soutien émotionnel parental. Quant à leurs parents, ils ne se distinguent pas clairement des autres quant à la disponibilité du soutien émotionnel qu'ils jugent offrir à leur enfant. En revanche, ils rapportent davantage de réactions et de critiques réprobatrices manifestant leur insatisfaction à l'égard de leur enfant. Finalement, la qualité du soutien émotionnel telle que perçue par les enfants prédit le biais dans l'évaluation de leur compétence scolaire. La perception des parents le prédit également, bien que plus modestement.

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A recurrent finding in schools is that although pupils' capacities are comparable, their academic achievement differs greatly. Thus, it appears that not all pupils make the most of their intellectual resources. The importance of motivational processes in explaining

these differences is well documented. On this subject, the study of perceptions of competence and self-efficacy has been particularly prolific. Bandura (1977) initially used the term self-efficacy to refer to a person's judgement of his/her ability to successfully perform a specific task. Harter (1978), on the other hand, defined perceptions of competence as a measure of the competence that a person attributes to him/herself in relatively general activity domains. However, since the construct of self-efficacy has since

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been broadened (Fleury-Roy and Bouffard, 2006) to apply to general situations such as a given subject whereas perceptions of competence can now refer to a set of activities pertaining to a specific domain such as a school subject, these two constructs have become relatively interchangeable. In this study, the term perception of competence is used for the sake of clarity and uniformity.

1. Accuracy of perceptions of competence and academic functioning

According to Bandura (1986), people's self-efficacy beliefs have an effect on their emotions, thoughts, motivation and behavior. Their optimal functioning requires, certainly, that they have the abilities needed to achieve their goal but also that they have a favorable perception of these abilities and of their capacity to use them appropriately (Bandura, 1993, 1997). This view is shared by Harter (1985, 1992, 1999) and by Deci and Ryan (1985). For all these authors, feeling competent in mastering one's own environment is a basic human need which plays a major role in a person's motivation and adaptation to the various domains in which he/she is involved.

The subjective nature of perceptions of competence means that many pupils have positive or negative biases with regard to their actual capacities. The impact of over-evaluating one's scholastic competence remains the subject of heated controversy. Some scholars maintain that such over-evaluation makes pupils highly adaptive (Assor and Connell, 1992; Bandura et al., 2003; Shogren et al., 2006; Taylor and Brown, 1988, 1994) while others consider it to be a risk factor that threatens a pupil's functioning and general adaptation (Baumeister, 1989; Dunlosky et al., 2005; Gresham et al., 2000; Robins and Beer, 2001; Thiede et al., 2003). On the other hand, it seems quite clear that judging one's competence too harshly is detrimental to the effective use of one's potential (Lecomte, 2004).

2. Illusion of scholastic incompetence

It was Phillips (1984, 1987) who coined the term "illusion of incompetence" to describe gifted pupils who have lower perceptions of their own scholastic competence than their peers. Unfortunately, this author's definition of the phenomenon takes for granted the fact that the level of real abilities is comparable among pupils in the same class and that only their perception of their competence differs. However, a degree of variability in academic abilities can most certainly be found in a class of gifted pupils and thus, Phillips' methodology contains limitations in interpretation and generalization. Since Phillips' work, few empirical studies have focused on the illusion of incompetence (Bouffard et al., 2003). Nevertheless, it is now known that this phenomenon exists in the normal population (Bouffard et al., 2003; Bouffard et al., 2006; Harter, 1985). In general, pupils with such an illusion exhibit a set of negative characteristics with regard to their academic functioning. In particular, they avoid challenges and see themselves as being less curious, less capable of making an effort and less interested in school subjects than their peers (Harter, 1985). They are more anxious about evaluation (Phillips and Zimmerman, 1990), attribute their success more to luck, effort or help received from others than to their own abilities (Bouffard et al., 2003; Bouffard et al., 2006), and report less pleasure, satisfaction and participation in class (Miserandino, 1996). They persist to a lesser degree and are less autonomous than pupils with a positive opinion of themselves, and their academic achievement is lower than their real capacities would allow (Assor and Connell, 1992; Borkowski and Thorpe, 1994; Bouffard et al., 2003; Cole et al., 1997; Kershner, 1990; Phillips, 1984, 1987; Seroczynski et al.,

1997). Some pupils also feel less well accepted by their peers (Larouche et al., 2008). It is also reported that, in the long term, these pupils drop out of school early, experience social isolation and have difficulties choosing and pursuing a career (Assor and Connell, 1992). To sum up, several correlates of the illusion of incompetence have emerged. They all show that this phenomenon negatively affects academic functioning and adaptation. However, the factors involved in the development of this phenomenon are not yet well known.

3. Relationship with parents and development of perceptions of competence

According to the sociocognitive models of Bandura and of Harter, children's perceptions of competence develop as they grow older and give meaning to the results of their actions in their environment, but are also subject to the influence of significant social agents in their life, in particular their parents (Bandura, 1989, 1995; Bandura et al., 1996; Harter, 1978, 1996). Thus, when their parents express satisfaction, encouragement and confidence, children are thought to interpret this verbal feedback as being indicative of their own competence (Galand and Vanlede, 2004). In this respect, after controlling for the effect of the academic results actually obtained, McGrath and Repetti (2000) observed a positive association between pupils' perceptions of their own competence and their parents' satisfaction with their functioning and achievement at school. These findings show that pupils do not only rely on their achievement to evaluate their competence, but that their parents' feedback influences the development of their perception of their scholastic competence.

In Harter's view, feedback and support provided by parents lead children to internalize and value certain standards which they then use to evaluate themselves. Several studies have indeed shown that acceptance and parental support as perceived by children are positively linked to the children's perceptions of their own competence (Franco and Levitt, 1998; Harter, 1990; Levitt et al., 1994; Nurra and Pansu, 2009; Ohannessian et al., 1998). Harter (1992) explains that the most favorable support parents can give their child is a combination of emotional and unconditional support rather than instrumental and conditional support. Instrumental and conditional support appear to reflect a rigidity in standards and low parental responsiveness to children and their needs, thus prompting children to feel accepted only when they follow rules and behave properly and for what they produce rather than for themselves as individuals. Conversely, emotional and unconditional support show children that they are loved for who they are, and that this love is not threatened by their inability to meet their parents' expectations. This position brings to mind that put forward by the proponents of attachment theory.

4. Attachment theory

Bowlby (1979, 1982) maintains that a child's attachment relationship with a parent has a lasting effect on his/her adaptation, in particular, through the development of internal working models which are reciprocally formed representational models of self and others. Thus, a model of self develops which includes positive or negative feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance and a model of others formed on the basis of trust or distrust in the availability and responsiveness of the attachment figure. These models allow the child to predict the parents' responses in various circumstances. As shown by Cassidy (1999), they influence children's perceptions and emotions and guide their behaviors. The models resulting from a history of positive interactions appear to

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