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The illusion of incompetence and its correlates among elementary school children and their parents

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Abstract

This study investigates several characteristics of children affected by an illusion of incompetence along with their parents' behaviors and reactions related to their child's performance. One hundred and thirty-three children at Grade 3 and 166 children at Grade 5 from public schools participated. At Grade 3, children affected by an illusion of incompetence reported lower intrinsic motivation and less pride of their results, more negative attitudes toward effort, but still succeeded as well as the others. At Grade 5, these children presented a much more deteriorated pattern of motivation, and their academic performance was much lower than their classmates. Little difference was observed among parents. However, parents of children characterized by an illusion of incompetence reported providing lower level of positive attention and interest to their child. Findings of this study suggest that the cost of the illusion of incompetence on children's functioning and achievement increases with age and school level.

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1. Introduction

The general objective of this study was to examine the illusion of incompetence phenomenon in students from elementary school. Specifically, it was devoted to examine whether or not children's illusion of incompetence is related to other components of their motivational system and to school achievement. It was also intended to provide some information on parents' behaviors and reactions related to their child's performance.

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It is generally acknowledged that accuracy of children's perceptions of competence or efficacy increases with age (Nicholls, 1979). However, most authors agree that it is from Grade 3 onwards that a significant relationship between perceptions and achievement can be observed (Assor & Connell, 1992; Bouffard, Markovits, Vezeau, Boisvert, & Dumas, 1998; Bouffard & Vezeau, 1998;). Younger children tend to overestimate their competence. According to certain authors (Ruble, Grosouvsy, Frey, & Cohen, 1992), children are inclined to perceive themselves as being very competent because they do not yet clearly distinguish their desires from reality. Stipek and MacIver (1989) suggest that during the preschool period, children are often praised for their participation in an activity, for their effort, or their good behavior. In accordance with Nicholls (1979, 1984), these authors suggest that young children tend to feel competent when they succeed a task following hard work or good behavior because they do not distinguish among notions of effort, skills, and behavior. Frey and Ruble (1987) observed that whereas children in kindergarten were more likely to compliment than to criticize them, the number of self-negative comments increased as students move through the school levels, as did their sense of assessment of their competencies. It is worth noting, however, that despite the increase in self-criticism, these authors have observed that the average child at Grade 4 continued to express two times as many positive comments as negative ones.

With the development of students' cognitive abilities and the increasing frequency of tests and grading of their achievements at school, children develop the ability to compare themselves to others and to consider a variety of factors to justify their performances. This is a view held by certain authors (Bouffard et al., 1998; Harter, 1985a; Stipek & MacIver, 1989) who believe that the integration of all the information that is needed to evaluate one's competencies is a difficult task, requiring a certain level of intellectual skills. In this respect, Bouffard et al. (1998) have showed that accurate evaluation of one's abilities appeared earlier in children with a high intellectual potential than in children who are less intellectual gifted. In this study conducted on normal children who were classified in three groups according to their intellectual level (high, average, or low), the authors have showed that in Grades 3 and 4, perceptions of competence were only clearly linked to achievement in students from the group judged to have above-average abilities. It is only from Grade 5 that such a relationship was observed in the group with average or below-average intellectual abilities.

In short, as observed in our Western societies at least, elementary school children's assessment of their abilities is generally marked by a positive rather than a negative bias. As a crucial dimension of motivation, perceptions of competence are inner resources that, when positive, foster the investment of efforts that are needed to learn (for a review, see Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998). However, as demonstrated by Phillips (1984, 1987), certain students are less optimistic than others and tend to underrate their competencies, thus manifesting what she has called an illusion of incompetence.

Therefore, despite the potential that is reflected in their standardized test scores, some children have expectations of achievement that are lower than others with the same potential but who have higher perceptions of competence or efficacy (Phillips, 1984, 1987). They prefer work that is not very challenging (Harter, 1985a); they consider themselves less curious and able to make effort, less interested in and more easily bored with school subjects; they are more likely to attribute their success to luck, effort, or to the help that they received rather than to their abilities; they are more anxious during tests (Phillips & Zimmerman, 1990); and are less persistent and independent than children with a positive opinion of their abilities (Phillips, 1987). Lacking the motivation that comes with positive perceptions of themselves, their performance tends to fall below the potential that they are able to achieve. According to Phillips (1984), these children will lack the resources to pursue studies that call for

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