



Perception of teachers and peers during adolescence: Does school self-concept matter? Results of a qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

A subsample of 36 adolescents with high ($n = 18$) and low ($n = 18$) school self-concepts ($M_{Age} = 16.4, SD = .54$) was selected from a previous longitudinal study ($N = 1088$) to participate in semi-structured interviews addressing their motivation and social relationships at school. A comparative thematic analysis was run inductively and revealed two themes (peer relations and teacher relations) and nine subthemes. The qualitative approach provided evidence for both similarities (e.g. classroom climate, motivation) and differences (e.g. emotional vs. learning support, high vs. low competition, acceptance vs. acknowledgement) among the subthemes. The results suggest the importance of acknowledging students' self-concept in the teaching process, as students' perception of social relationships at school may vary according to their level of self-concept: while students with a high school self-concept attribute equal importance to the emotional support provided by peers and teachers in their aspiration to "win the race", students with a low school self-concept prioritize the learning support provided by peers and teachers and express a desire to "be like the rest" in terms of classwork and grades.

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1. Introduction

Students proceeding through their educational journeys experience a natural development from childhood to adolescence. This is a complex process when a growing child develops the learning skills necessary to maximize their academic performance and develops a sense of self by acquiring important social skills. The transition from primary to secondary school is a crucial moment in this development. This time of "storm and stress" (Arnett, 1999) is generally characterized by physical and psychical changes in adolescents (Rosenberg, 1979) as well as shifts in their social environment: after four to six years of primary school¹ students entering secondary school encounter new peers and teachers who may uphold new or different expectations (Harter, 1996). Maladjustment to these new surroundings and their academic and social requirements might result in academic failure or school dropout (Ellis, Marsh, & Craven, 2005). Although there is a general downward trend associated with adolescence (Dohn 1991; Ladd et al., 2009), not all students are equally affected by it: while some experience changes as threatening, others take the opportunity for their own personal development (Ellis, Marsh, & Craven, 2005).

Self-concept plays a special role in this respect (Brinthaup & Lipka, 2002). There is evidence that, particularly during early adolescence (Seiffge-Krenke, 1990), self-concept (Shavelson et al., 1976) undergoes structural changes by becoming more abstract, differentiated and organized (Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998). Concerning the stability of self-concept during adolescence, findings from previous research are contradictory indicating either a slight rise (Harter, 1998) or a relative fall (Eccles et al., 1983). The dissonance of these results might be explained by the interchangeable use of self-related terms in earlier research (Hattie, 1992) – therefore a clear and consistent definition must be established.

In its broadest sense, self-concept can be defined as a person's perception of him- or herself (Shavelson et al., 1976). More recent research makes a further distinction between the cognitive component (self-concept) and the affective component (self-esteem) of the term (e.g., Schöne et al., 2003). Following this logic, self-concept might be defined as the sum of cognitive representations that a person maintains about him- or herself (cf. Maier & Pekrun, 2004). Self-concept is an important research area, especially for educational research, seen as it is considered to be both a condition for, and a major outcome of learning situations (Burns, 1979; Marsh et al., 2005).

Several studies have found evidence that a high self-concept (which indicates a person's positive cognitive representation of him- or herself) contributes to the general psychological well-being of an individual (Craven & Marsh, 2008). Therefore, a high self-concept might be considered an important protective factor (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Steinhausen & Winkler-Metzke, 2001) throughout the whole period of

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¹ Primary education in Germany typically lasts between four and six years, depending on the federal state.

scholastic transitions and adjustments. Meanwhile, a low self-concept might put students at risk by negatively affecting their social competence and inducing problematic behavior (Marsh et al., 2004).

The relationship between self-concept and academic achievement has been discussed at length throughout several decades of research (Wylie et al., 1979) producing a variety of theories. Covington's self-worth theory of achievement motivation (Covington & Berry, 1976; Covington, 1984), for instance, views a person's self-concept of ability as an important element of his or her self-definition because it motivates them to strive for academic achievement and seek social approval which, in turn, strengthens self-concept in the school setting. According to Shavelson's multidimensional model (Shavelson et al., 1976), self-concept in school is a constituent of general self-concept and can be defined as the set of beliefs that an individual has about his or her own study-related abilities, attributes and activities in school (Schöne et al., 2003). Moreover, Covington's theory argues that developing and maintaining a positive school self-concept (a sense of academic competence) is important for the development of an individual's sense of self-worth (cf., McGrew, 2008).

Further research on the association between school self-concept and achievement also produced the reciprocal effects model (Marsh, 1990) which postulates that school self-concept and academic achievement are mutually dependent and cyclically reinforce one another. These theories have inspired further research that explores the mediating role of achievement motivation in this association (Areepattammannil, 2012; Guay et al., 2010).

There is evidence that self-concept not only becomes more complex and differentiated during adolescence, but it also becomes increasingly dependent on others' perception of oneself (Fuhrer et al., 2000). As the focus of attention shifts from the family to the social environment (Fend, 1998; Harter, 2012; Steinberg & Morris 2001), relationships with both peers and teachers gain importance. This produces another disjunction between adolescents' individual needs and the implications of undergoing a major transition at school: new (academic and social) demands, multiple teachers, larger classes and often a new or altered peer groups (Rosenberg, 1979).

In adolescence, students' peers and friends adopt some of the social functions that are otherwise performed by their family members: they provide emotional comfort and attachment (Rubin et al., 2009; Steinberg & Morris, 2001), emotional support (Azmitia, Cooper & Brown, 2009), as well as learning support (Seiffge-Krenke, 1990), which positively affects students' academic motivation and achievement (Achermann et al., 2006; Birch & Ladd, 1996; Kindermann et al., 1996; Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996) and helps resolve related problems (Seiffge-Krenke, 1990). However, a new peer group simultaneously challenges the coordination of old and new friendships (Azmitia et al., 1998), which might result in feelings of exclusion or jealousy (Azmitia et al., 2009). Moreover studying in a new and larger peer group might result in peer pressure (Steinberg et al., 1996) and increased competitiveness (Harter, 1996).

In the event of maladjustment to a new peer group, a student must rely on alternative sources of support. Unsurprisingly, the transition to secondary school is also a time when students' need for social and emotional connectedness with their teachers increases (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010). This presents yet another challenge for the teacher–student relationship: as teachers become responsible for a growing number of students, their ability to develop supportive relationships with each individual student is compromised (Eccles et al., 1993; Wang et al., 2013). At the same time, emotional support from teachers is positively associated with students' school self-concept (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013), commitment to learning (Becker & Luthar, 2002), and higher achievement (Goodenow, 1993), especially during adolescence. Such positive effects promote better school adjustment and reduce the risks of peer victimization (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010). In contrast, troubled relations with teachers result in reduced intrinsic motivation, impoverished engagement at school and potential school dropout

(Brophy & Good, 1974; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

In sum, the current state of the literature provides evidence for the positive effects of a high self-concept in general, and a high school self-concept in particular. It also indicates a positive association between social support and self-concept, especially during adolescence. At the same time, empirical research combined with practical observations suggests the challenges of designing appropriate educational practices that assist students in the transition to secondary school which requires adapting to new social environments (Eccles & Midgley, 1989) whilst compromising close relationships with new teachers (Eccles et al., 1993) and potentially inducing adjustment-related problems.

Most research on school self-concept employs quantitative methods, yet qualitative literature, which holds the potential of generating a deep understanding of real experiences by exploring individuals' subjective viewpoints, feelings, thoughts, interpretations, and perceptions (Smith & Osborn, 2003), is lacking. Only few studies address the issue of school self-concept and social relations at school among adolescent students. To our knowledge, there are no studies that consider differences in high and low school self-concept and students' perception of social relationships.

1.1. Current study

Hence, the current qualitative study investigates potential differences in the perception of teachers and peers among students with high and low school self-concepts in an attempt to determine the specific influence of these social actors on motivational, learning and educational processes. In particular, the results should lead to (a) a deeper understanding of possible differences in the social competence and sources of academic motivation between students with a high and low school self-concept, and (b) the advancement of a differentiated, student-centered approach to developing prevention and intervention strategies in secondary schools that aim to support motivational, learning and educational processes during the transition from primary into secondary school.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A subsample of 36 German-speaking adolescents was selected from a prior longitudinal quantitative study ($N = 1088$), conducted in secondary schools ($n = 23$) in Brandenburg and based on self-report data. Out of 36 participants, 18 had a high school self-concept (HSSC), whilst the other 18 had a low school self-concept (LSSC), as determined by result interpretation tables from the SESSKO² manual. The SESSKO scales were developed by Schöne et al. (2002) to measure school self-concept in German-speaking countries. The subdivision was based on the raw values, percentage, T-value and T-value Band. The scale we used consisted of 5 items (see Table 1) addressing an individual's general perception of his or her current scholastic abilities, without implying any type of comparison.

The participants' school self-concept level remained stable over the two years (data was collected in 2011 (8th grade) and 2013 (9th grade)). In both groups, boys and girls were represented: HSSC: 7 boys, 11 girls ($M_{Age} = 16.3$, $SD = .53$); LSSC: 10 boys, 8 girls ($M_{Age} = 16.5$, $SD = .55$).

The informants were invited to participate in qualitative interviews through letters addressed to their parents or guardians. Interviews

² SESSKO-Skalen zur Erfassung des schulischen Selbstkonzepts [Scales to assess the school self-concept]

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