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The Impact of Secondary School Transition on Self-Concept and Self-Esteem[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Secondary school transition takes place earlier in Portugal than in most Western countries. This study aims to analyze the impact of this transition on the self-concept and self-esteem of Portuguese students, and to identify potential differential gender impacts. The sample included 377 students ($M_{age} = 9.46$; $SD = .93$; 52.8% boys). Self-report questionnaires were administered in 4th grade (middle and end) and 5th grade (beginning and end). Multilevel linear modeling with a repeated measures design was used to evaluate the evolution of self-perceptions during secondary school transitions. Results show significant decreases in all dimensions of self-concept and in self-esteem during this transition. Gender differences emerged with boys showing greater decreases in *emotional self-concept* and girls in *academic self-concept*. Students retained at the end of 5th grade had greater declines in all self-perceptions. The results highlight the importance of intervention to prevent the negative impact of secondary school transition on self-perceptions.

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O impacto da transição escolar para o 2º ciclo sobre o autoconceito e a autoestima

RESUMO

A transição para o 2º ciclo tem lugar em Portugal num momento anterior ao da maioria dos países ocidentais. Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar o impacto desta transição sobre o autoconceito e autoestima dos alunos Portugueses, bem como identificar potenciais efeitos de género. A amostra incluiu 377 alunos ($M_{age} = 9.46$; $SD = 0.93$; 52.8% rapazes), aos quais foram aplicados questionários de autorrelato no 4º (a meio e no fim) e 5º ano (no início e no fim). Para avaliar a evolução das autopercções foram utilizados modelos lineares multinível. Os resultados mostram diminuições significativas em todas as dimensões do autoconceito e na auto-estima com a transição. Existiram diferenças de género com os rapazes a apresentarem maiores reduções no *autoconceito emocional* e as raparigas no autoconceito académico. Os alunos retidos no 5º ano tiveram decréscimos maiores em todas as autopercções. Os resultados ilustram a importância de intervenções preventivas na transição para o 2º ciclo de forma a reduzir o impacto negativo destas sobre as autopercções.

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Palavras-chave:

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Introduction

One of the most difficult transitions that young people have to face is the transition one from elementary to secondary school (Eccles, 2004). Students enter new educational environments that are typically larger, less nurturing, more departmentalized (e.g., going from one classroom to another), more competitive, and more demanding academically, and so given the extensive nature of these changes transition to secondary school has been

consistently associated with a decrease of academic motivation, grade-point average, academic and social self-concept, and self-esteem (Alspaugh, 1998; Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Coelho, Sousa, & Figueira, 2014; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Simmons, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991).

However, these changes could be just temporary, as suggested by studies regarding self-esteem where changes are not maintained after the transition year (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Additionally, these findings originate from studies conducted in educational systems where the transition takes place after 6th grade, and therefore often coincides with students' entry into adolescence and the onset of puberty.

In Portugal, unlike most countries (e.g., United Kingdom or Spain), secondary school transition takes place quite earlier, as elementary school only encompasses four grades. Therefore, the scenario in which the difficulty of this transition is heightened due to its co-occurrence with other normative changes associated with early adolescence, such as the acquisition of formal cognitive operations, biological transformations of puberty, psychological shifts that accompany the emergence of sexuality does not happen in Portugal. Given the uniqueness of the Portuguese school system, the present study will focus on the question of whether the decrease in students' self-concept and self-esteem is due to transition to secondary school itself or to the physical, emotional, and cognitive changes associated with adolescence and puberty.

Secondary school transition

Secondary school transition encompasses a broad specter of changes to student's school experience (Coelho, Marchante, & Sousa, 2016). Academically, secondary school students are generally expected to be more independent and responsible for their own assignments. They also need to deal with the varied styles and demands of new and multiple teachers whom they perceive as being more demanding and less supportive than those in elementary school (Cantin & Boivin, 2004). Throughout the day they rotate between different teachers (Coelho, Marchante, & Jimerson, 2016), while also adapting to stricter grading and more social comparison (Cantin & Boivin, 2004). These adaptations may have negative consequences on students' academic and emotional self-concept (Coelho et al., 2016).

Social networks are disrupted and students need to make new friends and integrate into a new, larger, and more complex social environment, while coping with the loss of some of their elementary school friends (Eccles, 2004; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Additionally, students shift from being the oldest in elementary school to the youngest in secondary school (Coelho et al., 2016). The number of new peers may also make a difference, as Niesen and Wise (2004) concluded that when several elementary schools merge into one secondary school, students may perform more poorly academically than when all students make the move from a single elementary school. All these changes may negatively impact their social and emotional self-concept and self-esteem.

Self-concept

Self-concept, defined by Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976) as a set of perceptions that a person holds about him or herself based on personal assessment and feedback from significant others, reinforcements and attributions about one's behavior, has been widely studied in the field of psychology due to its direct involvement in individual self-regulation of present and future behavior (Delgado, Inglés, & García-Fernández, 2013). Self-concept

has been considered as central element in shaping personality (Delgado et al., 2013), a crucial indicator of satisfaction with life (Goñi Palacios, Echaniz, Fernández, & De Barrón, 2015) and closely related to psychosocial adjustment in adolescence (Fuentes, García, Gracia, & Lila, 2011). Other authors have shown that self-concept has a strong negative association with depressive symptoms (Kuzucu, Bontempo, Hofer, Stallings, & Piccinin, 2014) and influences the expression of psychopathological symptoms and aggression toward peers (Garaigordobil, Pérez, & Mozaz, 2008).

In Educational Psychology, self-concept is widely acknowledged as a central indicator of school adjustment (Veiga, García, Reeve, Wentzel, & García, 2015; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). In fact, most authors consider the mutual influence of self-concept and school achievement (Coelho et al., 2014; Fuentes, García, Gracia, & Alarcón, 2015; Marsh, 1990a). Self-concept has been linked through numerous empirical studies to other academic, social and behavioral outcomes, such as school engagement (Ramos-Díaz, Rodríguez-Fernández, Fernández-Zabala, Revuelta, & Zuazagoitia, 2016; Veiga et al., 2015), social competence (Fuentes et al., 2011) and pro-social behavior (Inglés, Martínez-González, García-Fernández, Torregrosa, & Ruiz-Esteban, 2012). Also, academic self-concept has a close connection to achievement (Veiga et al., 2015) with low academic self-concept as one of the most important predictor factors of school failure (Zsolnai, 2002) and high academic self-concept a predictive factor of academic success and school adjustment (Inglés et al., 2012).

Secondary school transition impact on self-concept

Wigfield et al. (1991) reported that academic and social self-concepts followed different patterns of evolution after the transition. Academic self-concept declined immediately after elementary school, and continued to decline throughout the first year of secondary school. This gradual decline may reflect a long-term effect of transition, as academic self-concepts could become increasingly negative as children progress through secondary school. Whereas social self-concept, after having decreased immediately after the transition, increased during the first year of secondary school, the authors have suggested that, this rebound occurs, because students adjust to their new school environment and re-establish their networks over the first year of secondary school. Cantin and Boivin (2004) however have reported sudden and persistent decreases in academic and social self-concepts after the school transition.

Given that secondary school transition in Portugal occurs at an earlier age (usually at the age of nine), there may be a different effect on self-concept since Eccles (2004) says that, by age 10, children are typically far less optimistic, and during that developmental stage there is a much stronger relation between their self-ratings and their actual performance, accompanied by a high differentiation in self-concept.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem, according to Marsh (1990a) is a more general self-perception reflecting a general self-worth feeling. This construct has been studied worldwide and cross-culturally (Bleidorn et al., 2016), and is one of the most widely studied variables in the behavioral sciences, with student's self-esteem being a central focus of school transition research (Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013).

Secondary school transition impact on self-esteem

To date, research on the effects of secondary transition has yielded mixed results; while there are studies that found no change in children's self-esteem following transition (Hirsch &

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