

Symposium session 3

Differential development of self-representations in school context

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This symposium aims at showing that students' self-representations are the outcome of personal interpretations regarding several school context variables in order to protect the self and help students reach personal goals. The papers to be presented go beyond the idea of self-representations as personal characteristics that remain relatively stable throughout the school years. They focus instead on the processes that underlie the changes on students' representations in situations where success or failure is possible. Even if students seem to be aware of the impact of school achievement on their self-image, they seem also be able to manipulate such impact, causing changes in their cognitive, motivational and affective states.

The four papers of the symposium show how self concept, self esteem and personal conception of intelligence change according to the use of several kind of school feedback: achievement results and social comparison, both mediated by the value of achievement goals throughout school years. Specifically, Antunes and Fontaine deal with changes in the causal relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement from middle to late adolescence; Peixoto analyses the strategies used by underachievers to maintain self esteem at acceptable levels despite their school performances; Faria reviews, in a sample of college students, the psychometric qualities of a scale previously designed to assess the personal conception of intelligence in secondary school; finally Escribe, Dupeyrat and Regner show whether or not the choice and direction of social comparison of high school students differ as a function of their achievement goals.

Academic self-concept and academic results: does the prevalence of the causal relation vary according to adolescents' age?

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Although academic self-concept has been referred in the research as a motivational variable related with academic performance, the causal relationship between these variables is still under questioning. Some authors found a prevalence of causality of academic results on academic self-concept (Fontaine, 1995), others found the reverse order of causality (Marsh, 1984; Shavelson and Bolus, 1982), and others still a reciprocal influence between academic self-concept and academic results (Skaalvik and Hagtvet, 1990). Students develop their academic self-concept based objective information such as academic results mediated by subjective feedback from parents, teachers and significant others. By the end of secondary school, students have already developed a self-perception of academic competence and efficacy which can, however, be more or less stable. It is hypothesized that for younger students the prevalence of causal relationship is from academic results to academic self-concept and self-esteem and for older students the prevalence of influence is the opposite one. Academic self-concept and self-esteem were tested using the Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ) (Marsh, 1988). The participants were about 800 students of both sexes and of low and middle socio-economic levels, attending from 7th to 12th grades, observed three times with an interval of two years. LISREL structural equations' models were used to test the causal relations between the variables self-esteem, academic self-concept and academic results.