

The implications of self-esteem development in primary school students

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Abstract

Studies that have been conducted on the topic of self-esteem have shown that it contributes considerably to various important areas of life. However, research has proven that there is ontogenetic variation in self-esteem, and the factors that contribute to its development are not yet very clearly defined (Robins et.al. 2002, Orth & Robins, 2022). Furthermore, researchers suggest that greater consideration should be given to the development of self-esteem in the context of close relationships (Erol & Orth, 2014), in addition to the implementation of engagements aimed at improving self-esteem. These engagements are intended to bring considerable benefits, both to the individuals and to society (Orth & Robins, 2022). In this context, the present research study aims to examine the impact of personal development activities on the level of self-esteem development in primary school students. For the purpose of this goal, we base our arguments on the hypothesis that personal development activities do determine the improvement of the level of self-esteem in primary school students. The design of the study entails quantitative, quasi-experimental, pre-posttest research. The trial was carried out on 40 subjects distributed in two groups, experimental and control. As a methodological tool, we used the LAWSEQ questionnaire (Lawrence, 1981), which measures the general level of self-esteem. After analyzing the data, it was observed that the average level of self-esteem felt by the students in the experimental group was higher than that of the students in the control group, nevertheless, differences were not significant from a statistical point of view.

In conclusion, the research hypothesis, according to which: Personal development activities determine the improvement of the level of self-esteem in primary school students, was not confirmed. Thus, it is necessary to reconfigure some of the personal development activities that were proposed, and the topic requires additional research.

Keywords: self-esteem; personal development activities; primary school students.

Introduction

As a result of former research carried out over the years, it is known that self-esteem represents an essential component to personal development. Studies by Trzeźniewski et al. (2003) showed that self-esteem remains relatively stable across the lifespan. Some studies have proven that self-esteem is different depending on age and culture (Lyu & Rios, 2019; Szczesniak et al., 2021). The explanation may be that, at a very young age, children place

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more emphasis on their parents' opinions, and as they grow, this emphasis is redirected towards friends (Lelord, 1999). Although theoretical studies, as well as data from longitudinal studies, suggest that self-esteem decreases from childhood to adolescence (Robins et al., 2002), the claim that self-esteem declines during middle childhood has not been consistently supported by studies, and for future research, the development of self-esteem in the context of close relationships should be taken into consideration (Cole et al., 2001; Huang, 2010; Kuzucu et al., 2013, apud. Orth & Robins, 2014).

Although the level of self-esteem fluctuates throughout life, it is an essential component of personal development and can be influenced by various factors. Some of the contributing factors that we mention are social, cognitive and biological changes (Trzesniewski et al., 2003), interpersonal relationships (Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Knee et al., 2008), personal beliefs (Crocker, 1999), values (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Martinez & Garcia, 2007; Lyu et al., 2019), successes or failures, etc. (Jordan & Zeigler, 2018). These factors can positively or negatively influence the trajectory of self-esteem.

Self-esteem is reflected through an individual's lifestyle, and it represents an accurate predictor of life satisfaction (Brown et al., 2001, apud. Szczesniak et al., 2021). Orth and Robins (2014) claim that we need a better understanding of the factors that shape the development of self-esteem. While there is strong evidence to suggest that self-esteem influences life achievement, evidence on the causes of a healthy development of self-esteem is still limited.

Self-esteem prospectively predicts depression and anxiety, moreover a high level of self-esteem leads to fewer mental health problems (Sowislo & Orth, 2013, apud. Orth & Robins, 2022).

The fluctuations of self-esteem levels factoring in age and certain elements are an indicator for one's academic performance. Thus, studies have shown that self-esteem prospectively predicts academic performance (Valentine et al., 2004, apud Orth & Robins, 2022). However, intervention programs do not constantly enable improvements in self-esteem levels in schools. Since most programs are based on cognitive-behavioral therapy, it is difficult to apply such a routinely program in schools (Iwahori, 2022).

Several experiments have been carried out to check the effectiveness of engagements on self-esteem. One of the experiments (Iwahori et al., 2022) aimed to analyze the effectiveness of the "Treasure File Program (TFP)" intervention for improving the level of self-esteem of Japanese primary school students. It was concluded that TFP brought an improvement for primary school students with low and average self-esteem.

Considering the fact that most intervention programs have been mostly therapeutic and much less educational, it is suggested that further research is needed before new successful engagements can be proposed in order to develop other aspects of self-esteem (Arjan et al., 2006).

Orth and Robins (2022), demonstrated that although self-esteem has been shown to prospectively predict outcomes in various important life domains, these findings do not provide sufficient evidence to establish causality. They suggest that future studies should focus on identifying the specific mechanisms that can mediate the beneficial effects of high self-esteem. Thus, this will provide a more accurate explanation of the causality relationship. Furthermore, self-esteem is an adaptive trait. Its improvement can bring considerable benefits to the individuals and to society in general (Orth & Robins, 2022).

Following the already existing studies in literature, it is suggested that engagements are still necessary and relevant for the improvement of self-esteem. Accordingly, this paper investigates the impact of an educational intervention program based on personal development activities for improving the self-esteem of primary school students. The research that has been conducted focused on the involvement of students in activities such as: awareness and self-awareness, emotion and communication management and team-building, depending on the needs of the students.

Theoretical background

Personal development

Our lives represent continuous development, from the prenatal stage until old age. Furthermore, development does not stop when the person reaches physical maturity, it is rather a constant process (Atkinson et al., 2002, apud Crețu, 2009). Development is defined as a change that occurs in the body, depending on the path it is on, from conception to death (Golu, 2011; Gherguț, 2013). Thus, we can take into account that, during different stages of life, progress occurs more quickly than in others, such as the difference between the first year of life and the life stage of regression (old age) (Munteanu, 2018). It is important to consider how human development occurs. It cannot occur by itself in all aspects, but needs to be stimulated, learned by the person in question. Thus we bring up interfering factors that influence development: genetic inheritance, environment and education (Gherguț, 2013; Verza & Verza, 2017; Munteanu, 2018). Considering these factors, we can say that family and school play essential roles for the harmonious development of students.

Personal development can be achieved as a result of self-awareness, self-reflection and the decision-making capacity, in a responsible manner, harmonious interpersonal relationships, stress management, effective learning techniques, creativity and realistic vocational expectations. To be able to acquire these abilities, a person's self-esteem level should be developed enough so that it is in accordance with the factors mentioned above. Consequently, two of the most vital roles in an individual's life are represented by the familial context and the educational context (school) (Băban & Petrovai, 2003).

For this reason, modern schools can no longer ignore the aspects related to the physical, mental, spiritual and social health of students, to the detriment of the imperative need for knowledge and school results. If there is no foundation for the development of a

high level of self-esteem, the learning process is affected. It is known that self-esteem is an important predictor for children's development and adaptation (Tambelli et al., 2011, apud Dârjan et al., 2020), but also for measuring mental and physical health (Mann et al., 2004; Trzesniewski et al. al., 2006; Schwarzer, 2008; Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2012; Orth & Robins, 2014; Silva et al., 2016; King & Chi, 2017).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem can be defined as: "the evaluation of oneself, resulting from self-acceptance and self-valuation or through comparison with others. Although it can vary from one situation to another, there is a constant tendency in which everyone evaluates themselves, that functions as a personality trait" (Cliniciu et al., 2004, p. 46). This is a subjective self-evaluation (Donnellan et al., 2011; MacDonald & Leary, 2012, apud Orth & Robins, 2014). It is closely connected with self-perception, which represents a fundamental dimension of any human being. Self-perception refers to the manner in which a person considers oneself to be good enough, compared to others. Therefore, it can be argued that self-esteem has both an evaluative and an affective dimension to self-perception (Băban, 2003). Self-esteem prospectively predicts success and well-being in different aspects of life (relationships, work and health), motivates the person to work hard and succeed, while it also aids in reducing stress (Gallup, 1992; Orth & Robins, 2014; Schiraldi, 2013).

Self-esteem is one of the primary factors in building and maintaining one's well-being. Thus, a child who exhibits a healthy self-esteem is more likely to reach his/her maximum potential. He/she develops successful social relationships, compared to those who feel deprived of personal value (Plummer, 2004). Although self-esteem is part of the fundamental elements of our personality, it is still a complex and intangible phenomenon which is not always acknowledged (Andre & Lelord, 2015). Similarly, it is known that high self-esteem can reduce the impact of stressful events and failure (Blossom et al., 2022, Mann et al., 2004, apud. Mertens et al., 2022).

Self-esteem is an important factor in the optimal development of each person. Otherwise, we are dealing with a constant battle with ourselves, which results in an unsatisfactory lifestyle. It causes the feeling of unfulfillment, and it influences interpersonal relationships and personal success. This creates a vicious cycle. As low self-esteem is known to be linked to depression, eating disorders, compliance issues and even suicide (Brooks, 1999; Kuhlberg et al., 2010; Oy, 1995, apud Ersoy, 2018, Touyz et al., 2008, apud. Colmsee et al., 2021). Thus, it can be said that the process of humans has an intrinsic component of the development of self-esteem.

During the preschool stage, children can exemplify only general features about themselves, information related to: age, gender, height, hair color, etc. From the age of 7-8, self-perception becomes more specific and crystallized. However, their self-esteem is not well defined at this age. It is still anchored within physical aspects of themselves. Towards

adolescence, the focus begins to shift from physical characteristics to internal aspects, for example: the way they behave, their aspirations, the traits that they discover. All this contributes to an accurate self-awareness of teenagers in the present for adults in the future. Simultaneously, a person with high and healthy self-esteem develops the ability to make responsible decisions, life becomes more meaningful, is less anxious and depressing (Michou et al., 2016; Yavuzer, 2016, apud Ersoy, 2018). This person has the ability to cope with peer pressure while developing a high degree of empathy. Consequently, this would contribute to a gradual decrease in bullying on school premises. It is known that the rate of school aggression in Romania is quite high from a statistical point of view (Stănculeanu & Manole, 2016, apud Dârjan, et al., 2020). Law no. 221 for the amendment and completion of the National Education Law no. 1/2011, the law against aggression was instituted in 2019. Furthermore, among specialized literature, studies have shown that self-esteem plays a mediating role between bullying and depression in children (Cole et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020; Orth et al., 2014, cit. Zhong, Huang et al., 2021).

The way in which self-esteem develops is perceived as a trajectory over the course of life, which can fluctuate. Among the studies that have been conducted, we mention the research done by Orth and Robins (2014), which stipulates that self-esteem develops from adolescence to the middle-age adult stage, reaching its maximum around the age of 50-60, and then begins to decline at an alarming pace until elderliness.

Theoretical arguments and data from longitudinal studies suggest that self-esteem declines from childhood to adolescence (Robins et al., 2002, apud Orth & Robins, 2014). However, the decline during middle childhood has not been consistently supported by several studies. Thus, it is suggested that future research should strongly consider the development of self-esteem in the context of close relationships (Erol & Orth, 2014).

Methodology

The present study aims to investigate the impact of personal development activities on the level of self-esteem of primary school students. In order to accomplish this task, we intended to evaluate the students' self-esteem in the initial stage. In accordance with the results that were obtained, we implemented a program based on personal development activities. The impact will be quantified by reassessing the students' self-esteem.

The hypothesis is that: Personal development activities improve the level of self-esteem in primary school students.

Participants and data collection procedure

Data were collected from two different schools localized in an urban environment. The LAWSEQ questionnaire was applied to primary school students, in pretest and posttest. In order to receive consent to carry out the present study, the principals of the two schools were contacted, after which we could speak to the teachers. They, in turn, communicated to

the parents about the purpose of conducting the research, including the assurance about data confidentiality. This way, the informed consent of the students' legal guardians was obtained.

A total of 40 students participated in this research, who were equally divided into two groups, experimental and control, and all participants were aged between 7 and 11 years old. (Table 1)

Table 1: Socio-demographic data of the subjects

	Experimental (N=20)		Control (N=20%)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Female	10	50	7	35	17	42,5
Male	10	50	13	65	23	57,5
Grade						
0 (preschool)	1	5	-	-	1	2,5
1st	2	10	6	30	8	20
2nd	2	10	4	20	6	15
3rd	4	20	4	20	8	20
4th	11	55	6	30	17	42,5

The research tool used for data collection

The instrument used for the quantitative research was the LAWSEQ questionnaire, which measures the general level of self-esteem in primary school children. It is a standardized type of tool and comprises 16 items that can be answered with yes, no or don't know (Lawrence, 1981).

Conducted activities

As part of the "Salvați copiii" ("Save the children") program, organized in an urban school, 20 students with typical development and 3 students with special educational requirements are offered support in completing homework tasks and other types of recreational activities. Through this program, personal development activities were organized within a school semester.

Personal development activities took place over the course of 14 meetings, with each meeting lasting 50 minutes. They were organized in 3 modules: awareness and self-awareness, emotion management and communication and team-building, and for each module 5 topics were allocated. Each individual activity was organized according to specific operational objectives, which contributed to the completion of the general objectives, such as

- a better knowledge of oneself and others;

- identification of the emotions they feel and the ability to manage them depending on the situation;
- team-work, through effective communication.

The activities began with the module about awareness and self-awareness, to enable everyone to get to know each other and get familiarized with each other. During this first module, the following topics were addressed: favorite activities; traits; defects; valuable but different. The second module, about emotion management, the topics were: my feelings, what we feel and when; pleasant and unpleasant feelings; emotions are different depending on certain events and how we can handle unpleasant feelings. The third module entitled "Communication and team-building", was focused on facilitating better communication and collaboration between students, both in small teams and in the whole group. The topics elaborated in this module were: team communication; together we can; teamwork and playing nice together.

The end of the intervention consisted in a summarization of all the activities carried out up to that moment. This last activity was conducted by organizing a treasure hunt, which represented a summative assessment to check to what extent the objectives were achieved considering the initial expectations.

Results

Descriptive Data Presentation

In order to have an overview of the subjects who participated in the study and the findings, in Table 2 we present the data related to the scores obtained by the participants.

Table 2: Averages and Standard Deviations for the progressing scores of the participants related to self-esteem

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>
<i>Experimental T1 (N=20)</i>	<i>13.45</i>	<i>6.02</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Experimental T2 (N=20)</i>	<i>14.70</i>	<i>5.45</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Control T1 (N=20)</i>	<i>13.45</i>	<i>4.72</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Control T2 (N=20)</i>	<i>13.10</i>	<i>4.35</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>22</i>

The descriptive data presented in Table 2 show that, on average, the experimental group reported a higher level of self-esteem, after the intervention (N=20, M=14.70, SD=5.45), than before (N = 20, M = 13.45, SD = 6.02), and the control group, although they did not participate in the activities, reported a lower level of self-esteem during the posttest

($N=20$, $M=13.10$, $SD=4.35$), in comparison to that during the pretest ($N = 20$, $M = 13.45$, $SD = 4.72$).

Table 3: Result for the independent pre-test Test t

Variable					t	p	df
	Experimental ($N = 20$)		Control ($N = 20$)				
	M	SD	M	SD			
Self-esteem	13,45	5,97	13,45	4,31	0,03	0,97	38

We used the t-test for independent samples to determine if there are significant statistical differences between the level of self-esteem in primary school students, experimental and control group, pretest. No significant statistical differences occurred at the level of the average results ($M=13.45$ - experimental group; $M=13.45$ - control group).

Verification of the research hypothesis Assessment

To check the research hypothesis according to which: Personal development activities determine the improvement of the level of self-esteem in primary school students, we carried out the statistical processing of the data by calculating the t-pairs test in comparison with the results from the pre-posttest, which aims to highlight the progress intercepted as a result of completing the personal development activities that had been proposed.

Table 4: Comparative Analysis between T1 and T2 for subjects in the experimental group, regarding the level of self-esteem

Lot experimental	Paired Differences			t	p	df
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
T1	13.45	6.02	1.34	0.2	0,41	19
T2	14.70	5.45	1.22			

In Table 4, we used the t-test for paired samples to check if the students in the experimental group have a higher self-esteem, as a result of their involvement in the personal development activities. Participants reported on average a higher level of self-esteem after the intervention ($N=20$, $M=14.70$, $SD=5.45$) than before it ($N = 20$, $M = 13.45$,

SD = 6.02). The results indicate that these differences are not statistically significant ($t(19) = 0.2, p = 0.41$).

Table 5: Comparative Analysis between T1 and T2 for subjects in the control group, regarding the level of self-esteem

Control Group	Paired Differences			t	p	df
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
T1	13.45	4.72	1.05	0.06	0,47	19
T2	13.10	4.35	0.97			

We used the t-test for paired samples to check whether students in the control group had higher self-esteem, even though they did not participate in the activities. Participants reported, on average, a lower level of self-esteem at the posttest ($N=20, M=13.10, SD=4.35$), compared to level at the pretest ($N = 20, M = 13.45, SD = 4.72$). The results indicate that these differences are not statistically significant ($t(19) = .06, p = .47$).

Table 6: The Results of the t independent posttest

Variable					t	p	df
	Experimental ($N = 20$)		Control ($N = 20$)				
	M	SD	M	SD			
Self-esteem	14,70	5,23	13,10	5,30	0,9	0,46	38

We used the t-test for independent samples to verify whether personal development activities improve the level of self-esteem in primary school students. The group of students in the experimental group had on average a higher self-esteem, after their participation in the activities ($N = 20, M = 14.70, SD = 5.23$), in comparison with the students in the control group ($N = 20, M = 13.10, SD = 5.30$). The test results indicate that these differences are not statistically significant ($t(39) = 0.9, p = .46$).

Discussions

The main objective of the present research project was to investigate the impact of personal development activities on the level of self-esteem of primary school students.

After doing a quantitative analysis of the data, we observed that, in terms of the level of self-esteem, the students in the experimental group reported a higher score, than the

students in the control group, but the difference was not significant from a statistical point of view. Thus, our research hypothesis was not confirmed.

As it is well-known that self-esteem does not fluctuate easily over time, the results of the present study can be justified by looking at the outcome from previous research. Research done by Orth and Robins (2014) demonstrated that self-esteem varies over time. Other studies have also shown that an intervention over a longer period of time is necessary in order to produce considerable effects in the improvement of the self-esteem level. A meta-analysis review, done on 116 studies, found that intervention effectiveness depends on the type and emphasis of the intervention (Haney & Durlak, 2010). The results of previous studies have also shown that intervention programs are more effective than primary prevention programs (Arjan et al., 2006). Intervention-based research has focused more on the global level of self-esteem. Thus, new research has been encouraged in order to develop intervention programs and to consider other dimensions of self-esteem (Emler, 2001, apud. Arjan et al., 2006). Given the results of the present research, we cannot say that our intervention had a significant statistical impact compared to previous research. However, our intervention study aimed not just to increase the level of self-esteem, but to improve it. The development of self-esteem entails chances of increasement as well as a healthy nature of improvement. Research conducted by Iwahori et al. (2022) has shown that an unstable level of self-esteem leads to narcissism. For this reason, it is important that the focus of an intervention remains on the manner in which the level of self-esteem improves, rather than just the degree to which it rises.

Taking into consideration the results of the present research paper, we observe that the average score obtained by primary school students in the experimental group increased in the posttest in contrast with the pretest. Quantitative analysis data, however, revealed that there were no significant statistical differences. This small difference could be a result of the possible idiosyncrasies the study might have had. The first limitation of the study could be represented by the criteria chosen for assigning the group of subjects: number, age, various specific needs. Consequently, it is recommended that for further research, one should separate participants into smaller, homogeneous groups, depending on their psycho-individual characteristics, as an initial criterion at the beginning of the intervention. Other studies have reached similar claims. One such study that we can mention is the study conducted in Japan by Iwahori et al. (2022), where there were two groups, one of 794 participants in the experimental group and 592 in the control group. In this study, participants with a discontinuous frequency of intervention activities were excluded from the study. This is a step which should have also been applied for the present study; as a consequence of the inconsistency of the subjects' participation in the intervention activities, we were able to find a decrease in the efficacy of the intervention.

Another limitation that we encountered was the number of topics contained in each module, as in it there were too many, considering the time that was available for the intervention.

An additional limitation of the study was the way in which the intervention was organized, in terms of the recurrence of meetings. For the present study, we resorted to increasing the number of meetings per week, as a measure of speeding up the intervention and as a result of the formative evaluation process. Therefore, it is recommended that from the beginning, for future studies, daily meetings should be held to carry out these activities.

Conclusions

If we take into consideration the limitations presented in the previous paragraphs, it is recommended that future research consider the number of participants per group, depending on personal characteristics. In terms of time allocated to the intervention, it would be advisable to resort to longitudinal studies, carried out during larger units of time, for example school years, school cycles. Another important aspect to consider is monitoring the attendance of the participants in the intervention. In addition, a similar study would benefit from the special contribution of a multidisciplinary team, such as a school counsellor, social worker and a teacher.

In conclusion, despite the fact that this research study was aimed to investigate the impact of personal development activities for measuring the improvement of self-esteem for primary school students, the recorded results, in quantitative analysis of the data, showed that the research hypothesis: *Personal development activities determine the improvement of the level of self-esteem in primary school students*, was not proved. This indicates that more in-depth studies are necessary for an effective intervention through personal development activities. Thus, accordingly, we believe that it is constructive to place more attention to the problem of self-esteem, taking into account the fragile age of the children. Moreover, we should consider the fact that this is the stage when the transition to puberty begins gradually, a stage that will be followed by adolescence, a time when self-esteem decreases (Orth & Robins, 2014). For this approach, it is absolutely necessary to involve both the teaching staff and the children's parents, as the family and the school represent the two extremely important and decisive factors in a child's development.

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