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THE TEACHER'S ROLE ON BUILDING THE HIGH-SCHOOL
STUDENT'S SELF-ESTEEM

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Abstract

The teacher represents one of the key-persons who can influence the student's personality in a significant way. Often, the teacher's mission has been compared with an artist who shapes the own creation, seeing its masterpiece in an ordinary bunch of clay. But being a teacher does not mean just to have scientific expertise in a particular field and pedagogical skills - here, it is also a matter of sacrifice, dedication, passion and consciousness, leading to be a model for the students. More, the teacher's influence transcends the time and the school space. A good teacher can change the student's life. Just as a teacher who is not aware of its own role can permanently cut the young wings. This can be happened in a period like the adolescence, when the younger's self-image is crystallized. In this context, the teacher represents one of the most important modelers who contributes to the perfection of this irreversible process.

This present paper tries to highlight the relationship between the *actual-self* and the *ideal-self* personality of high-school students and to emphasize on the teacher's contribution to the building process of student's proper and realistic *self-image*. The analysis was based on the feedback of 529 high-school students recorded in a dedicated questionnaire, addressed after the implementation of inquire-based science teaching modules designed in the frame of the European FP7 Project called: "*PROFILES - Professional Reflection Oriented Focus on Inquiry-based Learning and Education through Science*".

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1. Introduction

A model is a person inspiring us, someone from whom we can learn something and who remains imprinted on our soul and on our mind. For younger students, the teacher is always the authority the student refers himself to, who knows everything and who does everything correctly. For older students, adolescents, the teacher is a lighthouse of attitude, behavior, a source of experience. For each age stage, the teacher accomplishes another role: an educator, a friend, a counselor, a parent, a moral landmark, a leader, an example of life. The greatest challenge for a teacher is not to disappoint the students, not to lose their trust and to keep his place in their individual value hierarchy. The teacher is responsible for the good education and training of the students, he/she must be able to choose the best way for each child, guide each child to discover the taste of knowledge and plant in each soul in turn the desire to evolve, to be always better. The mission of the teacher is a difficult one, because he is working with living, unique, special beings, whose potential needs to be discovered and who must be helped to understand life, to be prepared for it.

A good teacher educates, guides, inspires and can change the lives of his/her students. Beyond the transferred knowledge, the teacher has the role of shaping the students as independent persons, able to succeed, to get integrated in the society. To be a teacher is an art, it is a gift but also a sacrifice, a difficult profession, with sacrifices and a lot of work, with responsibility assumed and the conscience of one's mission, but it is also a beautiful profession, bringing satisfaction and spiritual accomplishment. The influence of the teacher in the life of his/her students goes beyond the threshold of the school years, it is felt throughout his/her life, because the trust the teacher gives unconditionally to his/her students is the foundation or the structure on which the trust in one's person and one's self-esteem are built.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. The relation between self-image and self-esteem in adolescence

The *self-image* is a mental (internal) informational model about our own person (Golu, 2009), including the set of representations, ideas, beliefs related to our own physical, cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual features (Zlate, 2002); the self-image is a descriptive dimension of the personality, appearing gradually in the course of the ontogenetic evolution and changing its content during the entire life, under the influence of the experiences accumulated.

The *self-esteem* is an evaluative dimension of the personality, involving an affective component, valorizing regarding the self, indicating the extent to which the individual appreciates and respects himself or herself. The self-esteem is the expression of the value the individual attributes to his/her own person (Rosenberg et al., 1995), the extent to which each individual perceives himself or herself and thinks about him or her. It depends on the successes or failures experienced, on the satisfaction or dissatisfaction lived as a consequence of some satisfactory or unsatisfactory experiences. The successes determine the increase of the level of self-appreciation, of the trust in one's own forces, and the failures descend him/her - this is why the self-esteem is influenced by them, but it can also influence performances, a low level of self-esteem being correlated to the increase of the number of failures and the loss of one's self-trust (Iluț, 2001). The research shows the fact that a high self-esteem prevents the school

failure, certain learning difficulties, abuse of forbidden substances and deviant behaviors (Muntean, 2009) that can appear during the time of adolescence.

The main role on shaping and developing one's self-esteem goes to the family, but also the school, the relations with the others, the friends, teachers, environment, can significantly influence the one's self-esteem. This process begins in the early childhood and grows at adolescence.

There are two forms of self-esteem:

- *global self-esteem* relating to the way one values, accepts and evaluates his/her self in general,
- *area specific evaluations / self-esteem*, referring to specific self-appreciations on different relevant evaluation dimensions, e.g. self-appreciation of one's physical attractiveness, fame, competence in an activity area (Brown, Dutton, & Cook, 2001).

The self-esteem is closely related to the *self-image*.

Our self-image is strongly affected by our aspirations and ideals and is built depending on certain hypostases of the self: self-perceived self (the concept of self) and ideal or desired self, namely the way we would like our person to look like, under multiple aspects (Iluț, 2001). The present self is what the individual is at present, the desired self is what the person wants to be or seem like, to meet expectations, to be accepted by others, to face the pressure of the environment (Zlate, 2002). The discrepancies between the self-perceived self (present self) and the ideal (desired) self, indicate the extent of one's self-esteem. Higgins (1987) considers that the discrepancies between the real self and the ideal self are associated to the emergence of negative emotions, disappointment, un-satisfaction; a great distance between the present self, perceived and the desired self leads to the emergence of depressing states, and the level of one's self-esteem is related to the value or importance and significance that the subjects attach to the qualities desired (Iluț, 2001). The lack of correspondence appearing in the structure of the self-image, generated by the conflict between the real self and the ideal self, has a negative influence on the self-esteem.

2.2. The teacher's role in the process of self-esteem crystallization during adolescence

The adolescence is the period when significant changes occur on the personality level, in many directions, it is a period characterized by preoccupation in the sphere of self-knowledge and self-definition, of the discovery of one's limits and physical and psychological capacities, in point of relating and adaptation. Perkins (2001) shows that, in the attempt of defining themselves, the adolescents look for answers to the following four questions:

- *Who am I?* (with reference to assuming the new social and sexual roles);
- *Am I a normal person?* (the extent to which he/she is like the other whom he/she considers as "normal");
- *Am I competent?* (if he/she is capable/competent to realize certain things than others, i.e. parents, colleagues, teachers, society, treasure);
- *Am I loved?* (or worth loving, leaving aside the parents, who give unconditional love).

In the process of search and formation of the self-esteem, the teacher has a very important role, his/her expectations from his/her students influence their perception on their own person and the obtaining of performances - an effect known in psychology as the *Pygmalion effect* (Trouilloud et al., 2002). Praise, recognition, encouragement are strong determining factors for a positive self-perception.

Teachers can prevent or reduce the effect of a low self-esteem by several simple modalities: using the indices for comparison among students as little as possible, encouraging the students to trust their own person, highlighting the progresses made by reference to the result obtained during a certain period of time, by identifying certain strategies meant to prevent a negative self-perception, by increasing the motivation for learning, by approaching a supportive attitude to the students (Manning, Bear, & Minke, 2006).

3. Research Questions

Starting from the premise that the *self-esteem* is influenced by the attitude, the behaviour and the way of relating of the teacher towards the students, this research tried to find and highlight the relation between the *present self* and the *ideal self* at the age of *adolescence*. As a sensitive issue, this kind of research has to be made on a large level, due to actual condition of many teenagers, in accordance with the societal tumult. The teacher must know the students' expression for taking any necessary measures, coming so to help the student to understand the society and its offer, but also to know better himself/herself.

4. Purpose of the Study

The research had the purpose to identify the features specific of a high *self-esteem* and the degree to which they are estimated by the students to exist on the level of their own person and to see the configuration of their *present self*. At the same time, the research explored what is the *ideal self* of the questioned students, trying to make a comparison between the two data sets: *present self* - *ideal self*.

5. Research Methods

Having the purpose to search and highlight the relation between the *present self* and the *ideal self* at the age of *adolescence*, two questionnaires (generic items) were administered to high-school students - one containing the generic item: *I appreciate that I am...*, and the other including the generic item: *I would describe...*, in order to see the way in which the specific features of the *self-esteem* are profitably used by reference to the *ideal self*.

The indicators specific of self-esteem are: *attractive, self-confident, resourceful, respected, intelligent, creative, open, ambitious, courageous, strong*. The items were evaluated based on a six-step scale, from total agreement, to total disagreement.

The research sample was made up of 529 high-school students who took part in the implementation process of *Inquiry-based Science Education* lessons, in the frame of PROFILES project.

6. Findings

Figure 1 highlights the appreciation that the students have for the specific elements of *self-esteem* by reference to the *ideal self* - those considered the most important (total agreement) being: *intelligent, ambitious, creative, resourceful, self-assured*, while the least important is considered to be *attractiveness*,

because it is the only one of the terms given that refers to the physical aspect, all the others being attributes designating psychological, intellectual or moral features, much better associated by the students with the school context.

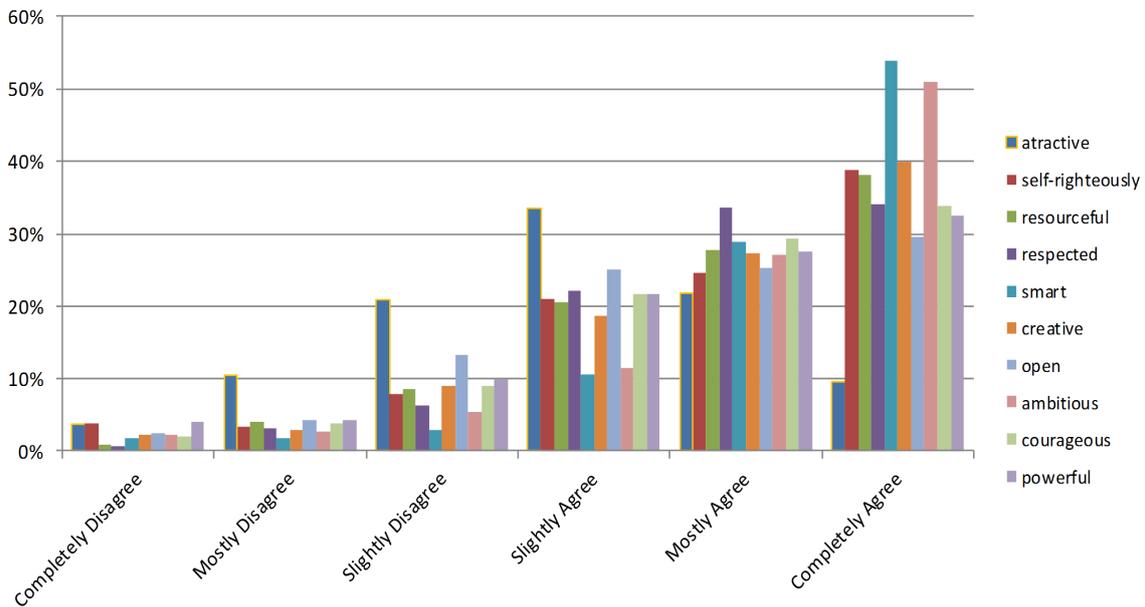


Figure 01. Representing the *ideal self* - students' feedback to the item: *I would describe...*

In figure 2, it can be observed the most appreciated elements specific of the *self-esteem*, by reference to the present self, namely: *ambitious*, *open*, *creative*, *resourceful*, *intelligent*, and the least important is considered to be *attractiveness* once more. All those terms recorded an obvious proportional decrease and a greater distribution than the other measuring scales, compared to the percentages recorded for the questionnaire regarding the ideal self.

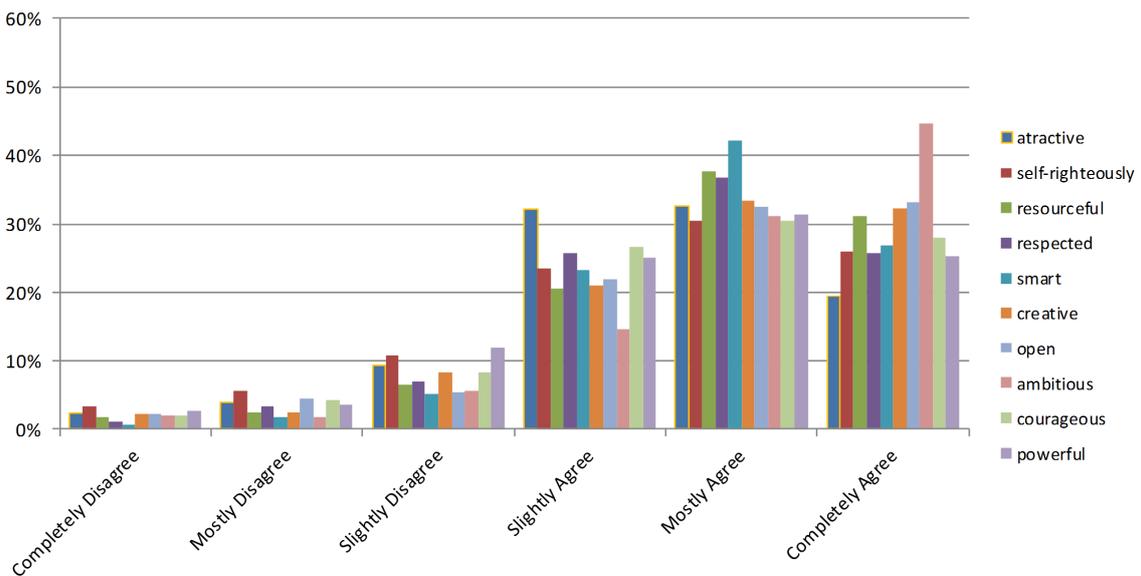


Figure 02. Representing the *actual self* - students' feedback to the item: *I appreciate that I am...*

Figure 3 emphasizes the gaps between the students' *ideal* and *present self*; thus, the term *smart* (intelligence) obtains the greatest difference between the present self and the ideal self, as target or

objective projected in the future to be reached, a possible explanation being that high-school students are aware of the need to develop their intelligence and give it a significant importance for the increase of the self-esteem. For them, to be intelligent is the guarantee or the key to the trust in one's own person, intrinsically related to the increase of the self-esteem. This idea is also supported by the difference obtained by the term *self-assured*, the self-assurance being synonymous with *self-trust*. Other terms that recorded differences are: *respected, creative, resourceful, strong, ambitious, courageous*.

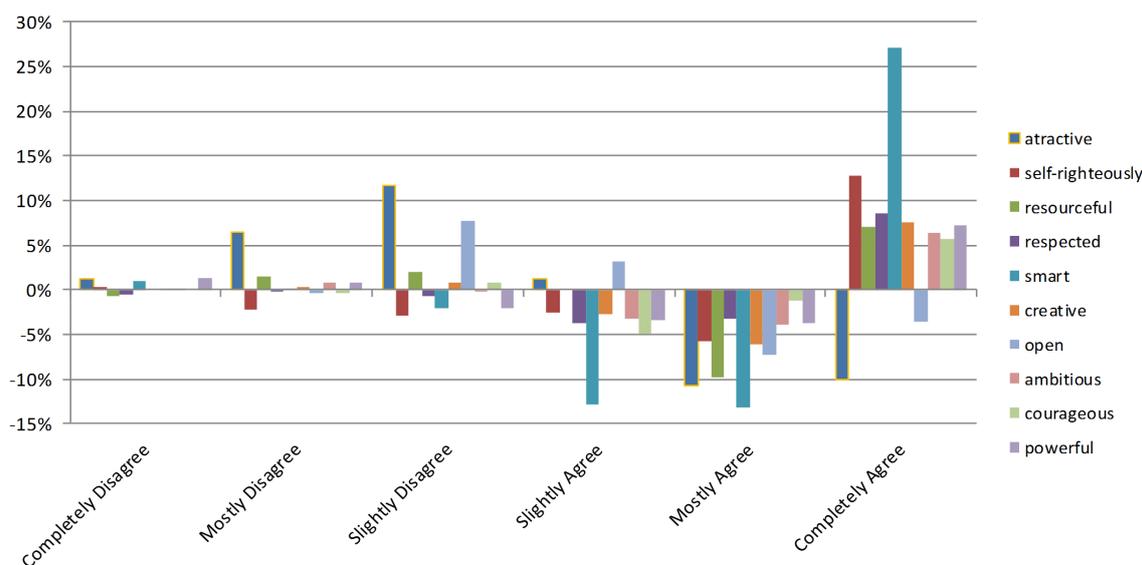


Figure 03. Differences between the expressed students' *actual self* and *ideal self*

7. Conclusion

The students' self-esteem is a valuable personal resource influencing the way they think, act, behave, and make decisions. Out of the undertaken research, it comes the aspects highlighting differences between the way the students think they are at this moment of their life and the ideal projection, as they would like to be. This must be understood at the age of adolescence, when the self-esteem is in full structuring process. The teacher, more than anyone, has the means necessary to the development of this dimension of the personality, so important on obtaining the waited success. The psychological implications of this study refer to two aspects significant for the set of problems related to self-esteem: the need to develop it, and the way the teacher, as a model, can contribute, voluntarily or involuntarily to the construction and definition of the self-esteem.

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