

The self-esteem of students with special educational needs in Greece.

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Abstract: Without a doubt, students develop their self-esteem from a very young age. Recent literature suggests that the self-esteem of students with special needs differs from that of typically developing students. Nonetheless, the issue of the self-esteem of students with special needs has not been fully explored in Greece. For this reason, the present research attempts to examine whether the self-esteem of students with special educational needs is lower compared to the self-esteem of their typically developing peers. The sample consisted of 210 students with special educational needs while the control group consisted of 210 students without special needs. The results showed that there is a difference in the levels of self-esteem between students with and without special needs.

Keywords: self-esteem; students with special educational needs

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I. Introduction

The notion of self-esteem refers to what people think about their worth as a person. It is about the way people evaluate themselves (Yousaf, 2015). Self-esteem reflects an attitude of positive acceptance or rejection of oneself (Plummer, 2010). One of the main researchers who studied self-esteem was Coopersmith (1967) who defined self-esteem as the degree according to which people believe that they are able, important, successful and worthy. In other words, self-esteem is a personal evaluation of self worth which is expressed by people's attitude towards themselves. More specifically, Coopersmith (1967) tried to identify the factors and the circumstances that make people have self-esteem and feel worthy while he referred to parental warmth, clearly defined limits and behaviour that shows respect. Rogers (1995) found a correlation between the self-esteem of a person with his or her "ideal self" stating that the level of self-esteem of a person reflects the possible discrepancy between the "real self" and the "ideal self", namely, between what the person actually is and what the person would like to be. According to Ball (2000) self-esteem is the belief that you are worthy as a person and the feeling of unconditional love for oneself. People have high level of self-esteem when they accept themselves even when they make mistakes and when they acknowledge their self-worth regardless of external circumstances (Ball, 2000). Similarly, Fennell (2006) believes that self-esteem reflects the way in which people judge themselves and the value they feel their personalities have. Self-esteem is developed from early on and is evolved during the rest of people's lives (Yousaf, 2015). In other words, self-esteem is a process which is present during all the developmental phases, from childhood to adulthood, while at the same time it is multidimensional as it refers to all the aspects of a person's behavior (Harter, 1999). Family, school, peers and the social environment in general are the key factors which shape self-esteem (Sheykhjan, Jabari and Rajeswari, 2014).

Depending on how people evaluate their abilities, their flaws and mistakes they are characterized as having low or high self-esteem. People who have high self-esteem feel content and face adverse situations such as failure in a positive way (Plummer, 2010). People with high self-esteem have better social skills and can handle challenging situations calmly. This attitude of people with high self-esteem is largely dependent on the way other people, namely 'the important others', treat them. In other words, people feel reassured and believe in their abilities when parents, teachers and friends show them that they respect and accept them despite their flaws and mistakes. As early as 1967, Coopersmith suggested that the development of self-esteem is primarily connected to the parents. When the parents encourage and reward their children from a young age then they help them believe in their abilities and form a strong personality. Many years later, in 2015, Yousaf's research confirms that parental upbringing plays a key role in the development of self-esteem. More specifically, the researcher correlated the self-esteem with social anxiety and parental upbringing and concluded that children with low self-esteem have more social anxiety than children with high self-esteem. Thus, when children start

school the teacher should encourage and reward them so that they develop confidence and believe in their abilities (Plummer, 2010).

Meanwhile, the research of Sheykhjan, Jabari and Rajeswari (2014) showed that there is a high positive correlation between the students' self-esteem and their academic performance. For this reason, researchers urge the teachers to foster the students' self-esteem, help them accept themselves despite their flaws and encourage them to try new things. In other words, it seems that students who have high self-esteem hold themselves responsible for their actions and courageously face change and challenges that may come up later in life (Plummer, 2010).

On the contrary, people with low self-esteem are afraid of failure and believe that they do not have the abilities to attain their life goals. According to Sorensen (2005) low self-esteem is connected to a faulty way of thinking which is, however, possible to change. This change can be achieved if people acknowledge their self-esteem and stop degrading themselves and their abilities. According to Fennell (2006) people with low self-esteem often experience feelings of stress, guilt, sadness and disappointment. More specifically, they feel ashamed of themselves and consider themselves responsible for the state they are into. Furthermore, due to the bad psychological condition they are in, they focus on other people's negative mood, they have difficulty in making friends and they do not accept being criticized even though they are very critical themselves. Low self-esteem often results from a lack of love, affection and care by their parents as well as from not being given credit for their successes.

Much research has been done in order to examine the reasons why a person might have low self-esteem. Sahin et al. (2014) highlighted the correlation between self-esteem, anxiety and social interactions. More specifically, the researchers came to the conclusion that teenagers with low self-esteem have high levels of anxiety regarding their social interactions, namely, their interactions with friends and teachers among others. Meanwhile, Chorbanshirodi (2010) researched self-esteem in relation to the Imposter Syndrome. In this syndrome, people consider that their successes are due to luck or fate and not due to their skills. In other words, Chorbanshirodi concluded that those who suffer from the Imposter Syndrome cannot internalize their success and as a result have low self-esteem. The research of Ekeland, Heian and Hagen (2005) regarding the self-esteem of students with special educational needs is also particularly interesting. More specifically, the researchers came to the conclusion that physical activity is a key factor that improves the self-esteem of students with special educational needs.

In general, students with special educational needs typically have lower self-esteem than typically developing students. Due to the difficulties that they face during learning, they experience school failure and receive negative feedback and, thus, form a negative self-perception (Elbaum and Vaughn, 2003). Similarly, Prout et al. (1992) pointed out that the self-esteem of students with special educational needs is significantly lower to that of typically developing students. Taking the aforementioned into account and given the fact that the research in Greece regarding the self-esteem of students with special educational needs is limited, the present research was carried out. More specifically, the following research questions were posed:

- Do students with special educational needs have lower level of self-esteem compared to typically developing students?
- Do students with special educational needs face more difficulties in their taught lessons compared to typically developing students?
- Do students with special educational needs feel that they are given the necessary support by the teachers in order to overcome their learning difficulties?
- Is the level of self-esteem related to gender?

II. Method

The Sample – The Procedure

The sample of the research consisted of 210 students with special educational needs, 114 of which were boys and 96 were girls. The control group consisted of 210 students without special educational needs. Similarly, 114 of the control group were boys and 96 were girls (Table 1). Regarding the age of the participants, the students were between 9 and 12 years old. More specifically, 34 students with special educational needs (N=16,2%) were 9 years old, 64 (N= 30,5%) were 10 years old, 55 (N=26,2%) were 11 years old and 57 (N=27,1%) were 12 years old (Table 1).

The compilation of the empirical evidence took place in central Macedonia, Greece, during the academic year 2016-2017. At first, the parents of the participants were informed about the research and then they gave their consent about their children taking part in the research. A written questionnaire was given to the participants. The questionnaire was anonymous and protected their personal data.

The research tool

In order to carry out the research, the Self-Concept Scale for Children (Lipsitt, 1958), which has been translated into Greek by Tsibidaki and Pachou (2003), was used. This scale consists of 22 adjectives-statements which reveal the participants' emotions about themselves. More specifically, the participants are asked to

choose from a scale of 1 to 5 (1=not at all to 5= most of the times) how each adjective corresponds to themselves. Only 3 of the 22 adjectives-statements have negative meaning (“shy”, “lazy”, “envious”) while the rest have positive meaning (“clean”, “friendly”, etc). The higher the total score is, the higher the level of the participant’s self-esteem is. As for the reliability of the scale, the correlations varied between 0.73 and 0.91 which means that the reliability is good. Furthermore, the participants answered to questions regarding their gender, their age, whether they think they face difficulties in the offered lessons and whether they feel that are being supported by their teachers. The statistical package SPSS 20.0 was used for the statistical analysis of the data and for generating results.

III. Results

At first, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test was used to examine whether the degree of self-esteem of students with special educational needs is lower than the degree of self-esteem of students without special educational needs. More specifically, the Mean Rank of students with special educational needs is higher than the Mean Rank of students without special educational needs (Mean Rank No=251>Mean Rank Yes=151,25) (Table 2). This finding means that typically developing students seem to have higher self-esteem than students with special educational needs. Furthermore, the difference between the means of the two groups of the sample, that is students with special educational needs and students without special educational needs, is statistically important (Sig= 0.000) (Table 3). Thus, it is confirmed that the self-esteem of students with special educational needs is significantly lower compared to the self-esteem of typically developing students.

It has also been examined whether the students with special educational needs face more difficulties in the lessons compared to typically developing students. After running Chi-square test it was noted that there is a statistically important relationship between the variable “special educational needs” and the variable “To which of the following subjects do you face difficulties: Modern Greek, Math or both?”. The statistical analysis showed that students with special educational needs face more difficulties in Modern Greek as well as in Math compared to their typically developing peers (Table 4).

Meanwhile, regarding the question whether the participants feel that they are supported by the teachers, 54.4% chose the answers “most of the times” and “always”. As far as the gender is concerned, girls seek help and comfort from their teachers more often compared to boys. More specifically, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the data do not follow a normal distribution so the non parametric test was carried out. The non parametric Mann-Whitney test showed that the Mean Rank of girls who seek the teacher’s support when they are sad is higher than the Mean Rank of boys (Mean Rank Boy=198,66>Mean Rank Girl=222,51). (Table 5) Furthermore, the difference in the means of girls and boys was found to be statistically important (Sig=0.038) (Table 6).

Furthermore, it was examined whether the gender affects the level of self-esteem of typically developing students. The non parametric Kruskal-Wallis test showed that the Mean Rank of typically developing girls is higher than the Mean Rank of typically developing boys (Mean Rank Boy=92,95 > Mean Rank Girl=109,18) (Table 7). More specifically, there was a statistically important (Sig=0.048) difference between the means of the typically developing girls and boys since girls without special educational needs were found to have higher self-esteem compared to boys without special educational needs (Table 8).

IV. Discussion

The analysis of the results showed that the degree of self-esteem of students with special educational needs is significantly lower compared to the degree of self-esteem of typically developing students. In other words, the special educational needs of students have a negative effect on their self-esteem. This finding is in line with the results of a similar research carried out by Kokkiades and Kourkouta (2016) according to which students with special educational needs have lower levels of self-esteem compared to typically developing students. Similarly, the research of Martimianaki (2015) showed that students with learning difficulties showed lower level of self-esteem compared to students without learning difficulties. Similar findings were also reported in the research of Patinioti and Polichronopoulou (2014) who found within a sample of 140 students with and without learning difficulties that students without learning difficulties have higher level of self-esteem compared to students with learning difficulties.

Additionally, according to the results of the present research, students with special educational needs face more difficulties in Modern Greek and Math compared to typically developing students. It seems, that is, that the special educational needs of the students greatly affect their self-esteem as well as their school performance which is poorer compared to the school performance of typically developing students. Similar results were reported by the research of Mitsiaki (2006) according to which poor school performance of students with special educational needs in Modern Greek and Math are linked to their low level of self-esteem.

Regarding the way in which the participants of the present research evaluate the support that they receive from the teachers in order to overcome their learning difficulties, there was no significant statistical difference between students with special educational needs and the control group. Yet, it is worth mentioning that a high

percentage of the total of the participants thinks that they do not receive the appropriate support in order to face their learning difficulties.

Meanwhile the present research regarding the variable “gender” showed that the level of self-esteem of typically developing girls is much higher than the level of self-esteem of typically developing boys. Yet, this finding is not in agreement with the finding of the research of Sheykhjan, Jabari and Rajeswari (2014) which took place in Iran and which showed that the level of self-esteem between boys and girls is the same.

Similarly, the finding of the research of Arshad, Zaidi and Mahmood (2015) is not in agreement with the finding of the present research. More specifically, the boys’ level of self-esteem of is higher compared to the girls’ level of self-esteem. However, this disagreement of the research findings could be attributed to the different culture of the participants since the research of Arshad, Zaidi and Mahmood (2015) was carried out in Iran and not in Greece.

Regarding the gender of the students who seek help from their teachers, the present research showed an important differentiation. More specifically, more girls with and without special educational needs than boys seek the help of their teachers.

The research of Giavrimi and Savva (2002) shows a similar differentiation regarding the gender. They concluded that boys have lower level of self-perception compared to girls regarding their school performance as well as their social skills.

Limitations of the research

One of the main limitations of the research is the small size of the sample. Moreover, the results cannot be generalized due to the fact that the sample was selected from only one region of Greece, namely central Macedonia.

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Table 1: The age of students with and without special educational needs.

	Students with educational needs			
	Yes	No	Total	
	Fequency	Frequency	Frequency	
Age	9	34	44	78
	10	64	49	113

11	55	45	100
12	57	72	129
Total	210	210	420

Table 2

	Special Educational Needs	N	MeanRank	Sum of Ranks
Level of Self-esteem	Yes	201	151,25	30400,50
	No	200	251,00	50200,50
	Total	401		

Table 3

	Level of Self-esteem
Mann-Whitney U	10099,500
Wilcoxon W	30400,500
Z	-8,621
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,000

Table 4

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	92,191 ^a	3	,000
Likelihood Ratio	102,506	3	,000
Linear-by-Linear Association	26,561	1	,000
N of Valid Cases	419		

Table 5

	Gender	N	MeanRank	Sum of Ranks
Do you ask for the support of your teacher when you are sad?	Boy	228	198,66	45294,00
	Girl	190	222,51	42277,00
	Total	418		

Table 6

	Do you ask for the support of your teacher when you are sad?
Mann-Whitney U	19188,000
Wilcoxon W	45294,000
Z	-2,078
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,038

Table 7

	Gender	N	MeanRank
Degree of self-esteem	Boy	107	92,95
	Girl	93	109,18
	Total	200	

Table 8

	Degree of self-esteem
Chi-Square	3,919
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	,048

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