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Self- concept of adolescents with visual impairments

An account is given of a current research project which is examining the impact of social inclusion on the self-concept of adolescents with visual impairments and the way this differs from their typically developing sighted peers. The study considers developmental and cognitive theories which are used to explain the development of self-concept in typical and atypical adolescents and the impact of social inclusion on this particular aspect of mental health.

Introduction

Research shows that the development of social relationships with teachers and peers in school may affect adolescents' self-concept (Ervin & Stryker, 2001), which is here defined as the way that individuals perceive themselves, including their thoughts and feelings about themselves, their own characteristics and what they consider their most impressive characteristics (Coopersmith & Fieldman, 1974; Kasomo, 2012).

Students with positive self-concept perform better academically and develop stronger social relationships with their peers and teachers (Demo, 2001). Consequently, they succeed better in their romantic relationships and future working life (Chin-Tsu, C.,

Chun-Fu, C., Jin-Li, H. & Cheng-Cai W., 2015). However, several studies show that adolescents with visual impairments are less socialized in school than their sighted classmates and this fact may negatively influence their self-concept (Jessup, Bundy, Hancock and Broom, 2018; Roseblum, 2000).

The impact of social relationships on the self-concept of both sighted and adolescents with visual impairments is currently being examined at Kingston University London in England. The current research is being carried out within the context of two major theoretical approaches: socioecological theory and social cognitive theory.

Socioecological theory

The first major theory that might be applied to the impact of social relationships with peers and teachers on the self-concept of adolescents with visual impairments is the Bronfenbrenner ecological model which examines human development by studying how individuals construct the specific environments in which they live and why their socio-emotional development (for instance self-concept) is affected by these environments. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1986), children's social ecological system is composed of five socially organized subsystems: The microsystem, which describes the social relationships that are developed between children and their family members and

between children and their teachers and peers in the school environment; the mesosystem, which refers to the connection between the structures of the children's microsystem, for instance the social relationships among parents, teachers and peer group; the exosystem, which interprets the impact of parents' settings on children's psychological development, for instance parents' workplace; the macrosystem, which analyses the impact of socioeconomic status and nationality on children's development and the chronosystem which includes the psychological changes that occur with the aging of the child, for instance during adolescence. In this study, we are focusing on the impact of microsystem (social relationships with teachers and peers in the school environment) on the self-concept of adolescents with visual impairments.

We did not find any studies which have used Bronfenbrenner's model in order to indicate the impact of social relationships with teachers and peers on the self-concept of adolescents with visual impairments. However, socioecological theory has been applied to recent studies which examine the impact of social networks on specific constructs of the self in sighted children and adolescents. Spilt, Lier, Leflot, Onghena and Colpin (2014) investigated the developmental links between peer rejection, social self-concept and internalizing problems in children aged 7 years and 5 months. The findings demonstrated that peer rejection has a negative impact on children's self-concept, which may affect the development of internalizing problems in children. Williams, McMahon

and Keys (2014) designed two ecological models in order to examine the impact of school experiences and academic achievement on the self-efficacy of 117 adolescents and young adults with and without special educational needs, aged from 15 to 21 years, in transition. Therefore, we are seeking to determine whether a similar model to the ones described above may explain the socio-emotional development of adolescents with visual impairments and demonstrate the significant relationship between social inclusion in school and development of self-concept in adolescents with visual impairments.

Social cognitive theory

The second theory which might be applied to the effect of social relationships with teachers and peers on the self-concept of adolescents with visual impairments is the social cognitive theory. There is a reciprocal relationship between the self and their environment: Individuals are not autonomous agents but are influenced directly by their environment as they interact with it. Additionally, individuals evoke different reactions from their social environment, which are influenced by their personal characteristics and social roles, even before they act or say anything (Bandura, 1999; Mohammed, 2012).

Social cognitive theory has been applied to recent studies which examine the impact of class characteristics and social inclusion on the different domains of self-concept in

sighted adolescents. Trautwein, Lüdtke, Marsh and Nagy (2009) investigated the impact of class characteristics on the mathematical self-concept of high-achieving and low-achieving adolescents in 156 secondary schools in Germany. Students who had a positive opinion of their class's characteristics reported higher scores of mathematics self-concept than their classmates who had a negative opinion of their class's characteristics. Jones, Audley-Piotrowski and Kiefer (2012) examined the impact of social relationships with peers on the academic performance of 17,591 adolescents who were attending the 10th grade of 752 public and private schools in the United States. The findings of this study indicated that when adolescents listen to their friends talking about social activities, such as romantic relationships, they will stop thinking about their academic performance and will focus on the same interests with their social group.

Based on this theory, we are assuming that the peer group that adolescents with visual impairments belong may have a similar impact, to the one described above, on the way they act and the feelings that they develop for themselves. Specifically, the consistency with which the development of social relationships with peers is found to have a certain impact on the mathematical self-concept of sighted adolescents suggests that these social relationships may have a similar impact on other domains of self-concept in adolescents with and without visual impairments and should be further investigated.

Differences in self-concept

Several recent studies have investigated global self-concept and/or the nature of selected domains of self-concept in adolescents with visual impairments (Augestad, 2017). Garaigordobil and Bernarás (2009) examined the global self-concept, self-esteem and psychopathological symptoms of 90 adolescents who participated in the study with ages between 12 and 17 years, 61 of whom were sighted and 29 had visual impairments. Participants were selected from secondary and high school educational centres from three provinces of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (ACBC) in Spain. The findings of the study did not indicate any significant differences in the self-concept and self-esteem between adolescents with and without visual impairments. However, adolescents with visual impairments had higher scores in most psychopathological symptoms (obsession-compulsion, hostility, paranoid ideation, melancholy depression and positive symptom distress score) compared to their sighted peers. According to the researchers of this study, the development of positive social relationships may be a predictor factor for positive self-concept in adolescents with visual impairments.

Lifshitz, Hen and Weisse (2007) investigated the nature of six specific domains of self-concept (personal self-concept, concept held by friends, concept held by teachers, concept held by the father, concept held by the mother and attitude toward school) in 40 adolescents with visual impairments aged 13-18 years in Israel; 32% of the participants

in the study were blind and 68% were partially sighted. A third group of sighted students also participated in the study. The results of the study showed that adolescents with visual impairments had similar self-concept to their sighted peers. In fact, the scores of the adolescents with visual impairments were higher than the scores of sighted adolescents, except for the specific score which was referring to their fathers' attitudes towards them.

On the other hand, there are some studies which indicated that adolescents with visual impairments have more negative self-concept compared to their sighted peers. Grønmo and Augestad (2000) investigated the differences in physical activity, self-concept and self-worth of 104 French and Norwegian adolescents aged 13-16 years with and without visual impairments; 20 of them were blind and more specifically, 12 of them were French adolescents who were attending special schools for blind students and 8 of them were Norwegian adolescents who were attending mainstream schools. The findings of the study did not show any significant differences in physical activity between French students with blindness who were attending special schools and Norwegian students with blindness who were attending mainstream schools. However, adolescents with blindness had significantly lower global self-worth and self-concept than their sighted peers.

López-Justicia, Pichardo, Amezcua and Fernandez (2001) examined five specific domains of self-concept (personal self, family self, moral/ethical self, social self and

physical self) in partially sighted children and adolescents aged from 4 to 17 years, who were attending regular schools in Granada in Spain or other nearby towns. According to the findings of the study, children and adolescents with visual impairments had more negative self-concept than their sighted peers. Significant differences among sighted and visually impaired adolescents were recorded in the “physical appearance” domain; It has been found that negative comments and prejudice that people with visual impairments accept throughout their life are not obvious until adolescence.

Halder and Datta (2012) focused on six selected domains of self-concept (behaviour, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, happiness and satisfaction) in 100 sighted and 60 blind adolescents aged from 15 to 18 years from some selected schools in India (partially sighted students were excluded from the study). Participants were matched according to age, school, location and socioeconomic status of the family. The findings of the study demonstrated that sighted adolescents had more positive self-concept than their peers with visual impairments who seemed unsatisfied with the way they were leading their life. Significant differences between the two groups were found in specific aspects of self-concept: physical appearance, popularity, happiness and satisfaction.

Datta and Talukdar (2016) explored the impact of visual impairment on six particular domains of self-concept (physical, moral, personal, family, social and academic) and on global self-concept of blind and partially sighted adolescents, aged from 15 to 18 years and young adults, aged from 19 to 25 years. The sample consisted of 25 participants and the study took place in special and mainstream schools in South Australia. Participants were matched according to their age, educational level and the schools that they were attending. Most participants with visual impairments had negative self-concept because they compared themselves with their sighted peers and believed that they were different from them. The very small percentage of students with visual impairments who had positive self-concept may compare themselves with students who perform much weaker than them in order to maintain their positive self-view.

All the studies referred to above have used quantitative scales in order to examine the self-concept of children and adolescents with visual impairments. However, the scales and methodologies that have been used are different and examined different domains of self-concept which is theorized to be multi-dimensional. Therefore, scores of self-concept are not easily generalised across domains and there is no clear picture in the literature about the different domains of self-concept that are affected by visual impairment. Consequently, we are seeking to compare the self-concept of students with visual impairments to the self-concept of their sighted peers and identify the specific domains

of self-concept where sighted students and students with visual impairments need specific support, by using Harter's questionnaire about self-concept (2012). According to Harter (2012), self-concept includes scholastic competence, social competence, athletic competence, physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioural conduct and close friendship.

There is a high level of variability regarding the onset and extent of vision loss and the age range of the participants in the studies above: López-Justicia et al. (2001) examined the self-concept of children and adolescents with low vision aged from 4 to 17 years (blind participants were excluded from the study), Lifshitz et al. (2007) measured the self-concept of sighted, blind and partially sighted adolescents aged from 13 to 18 years, Halder and Datta (2012) focused on the self-concept of sighted and blind adolescents aged 15-18 years (in this case, partially sighted adolescents were excluded), Grønmo and Augestad (2000) also focused on the self-concept of sighted and blind adolescents aged 13-16 years and adolescents with low vision were excluded from the study, Garaigordobil and Bernarás (2009) compared the self-concept of adolescents with and without visual impairments (there was no distinction between blind and partially sighted adolescents in the analysis section) and Datta and Talukdar (2016) compared the self-concept of blind and partially sighted adolescents aged from 15 to 18 years and young adults aged from 19 to 25 years. Thus, it is hard to draw out consistent patterns.

Moreover, these studies took part in many different countries in the world (Spain, Israel, France, India, Norway and South Australia), but not yet in the United Kingdom. As a result, there is no clear picture in the literature regarding the differences in the self-concept of adolescents with different onset and extent of visual impairments in the United Kingdom. Because of the high cultural variability in the studies described above and the differences in their findings, we assume that sociocultural influences and different education systems may play an important role in the development of self-concept and specific attitudes towards visual impairments, therefore it is important to explore the differences in self-concept of adolescents with and without visual impairments in the United Kingdom.

Generally, adolescence is a sensitive period for the development of personal identity often through an extensive exploration of personal beliefs and goals. Psychosocial theory suggests that healthy identity development during the adolescent period is a precursor of success in future career development and romantic relationships during adulthood (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Crocetti, 2017). Adolescents with visual impairments not only have to face the usual developmental changes of adolescence, but also the challenges that visual impairment offers, such as attachment disorders (Demir, Bolat, Yavuz, Karacetin, Dogangun & Kayaalp, 2014).

The impact of onset and extent of visual impairment

The onset and extent of visual impairments differ from one individual to another and according to the findings of the studies described below, these two factors may have a significant impact on the development of particular aspects of the self (for instance self-concept) in adolescents with visual impairments.

Pinquart and Pfeiffer (2013) examined the development of self-identity in 63 adolescents with blindness, 117 adolescents with low vision and 540 sighted adolescents from three special and six regular schools in Germany, by asking them to complete a 32-item questionnaire. According to the findings of the study, adolescents with congenital visual impairments had lower levels of identity exploration than their peers with acquired visual impairments. The researchers of the study explained that individuals with acquired visual impairments may have explored their self-identities before their vision loss and developed specific social skills which helped them in establishing positive social relationships. In addition, adolescents with blindness demonstrated lower levels of identity exploration. The researchers of the study explained that severe blindness may be associated with more dependence on family members which may have an impact on the development of self-identity.

Pinquart and Pfeiffer (2014) also conducted a longitudinal study in order to examine the psychological problems of 182 adolescents with visual impairments and 560 sighted adolescents in Germany. The participants of the study completed a questionnaire regarding their behaviours, emotions and social relationships. The results of the study indicated that adolescents with an earlier onset of visual impairments have more socio-emotional problems than their peers with acquired blindness. Similar to the previous study, the researchers explained that adolescents with an earlier onset of visual impairment may have developed more social skills before their vision loss and these social skills may have helped them building and maintaining positive social relationships. However, the findings of the study did not indicate any differences in the development of psychological problems among adolescents with blindness and low vision.

Parween (2015) investigated the demographic variables, such as age, gender, extent and onset of visual impairment, school setting, educational level and socioeconomic status of the family, which may have an impact on the emotional intelligence of students with visual impairments who were attending higher educational institutions in India. A total of 60 participants with blindness or low vision, aged from 16 to 19 years, participated in this study. The results of the study indicated that the only variable which had a significant effect on the emotional intelligence of students with visual impairments was the onset of visual impairment: Participants with a later onset of visual impairments showed higher

levels of emotional intelligence and they could navigate better their social relationships than participants who were congenitally visually impaired. Parween explained that individuals with acquired visual impairments, may have the chance to explore the world before their vision loss and develop all the appropriate social skills. However, there were no differences found in the emotional intelligence among students with blindness and low vision.

Consequently, we are seeking to determine whether similar findings, to the studies described above, regarding the impact of onset and extent of visual impairments on adolescents' socio-emotional development, may be applied to the self-concept of adolescents with visual impairments in the United Kingdom.

Summary

Social inclusion at school is believed to play a considerable role in the development of self-concept in children with special educational needs. At present we are investigating the impact of social relationships with teachers and peers on the self-concept of adolescents with and without visual impairments. The findings of this study may help future researchers create innovative educational approaches which will promote the well-being of adolescents who feel more vulnerable. They may also help people who interact

with sighted and visually impaired adolescents, such as parents, headteachers, teachers and special educators, identify the students who need more help and provide them with the appropriate support. We would welcome the chance to discuss our research further with interested professionals or participants.

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