

THE LEARNING PROFESSION: THE CORRELATION BETWEEN STUDENT'S SELF-ESTEEM AND THE SUCCESS OF LEARNING – EMPIRICAL STUDY

NICOLETA LIȚOIU^{a*}

^a University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest, 313 Splaiul Independenței Street, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

During his/her school career, the student experiences the “learning profession”, a new concept, promoted by Ph. Perrenoud in 1996, aiming to achieve success, although success may embody different things, depending on the meaning attributed to it by the student: to pass examinations; to keep up appearances; to play with the rules; to behave properly etc. In this context, with the concept of learning profession, the concept of self-esteem occurs in education and psychology experts' debates, the social responsibility and the co-participation of the student to the education process representing an important link between the two mentioned concepts. This paper aims to present some specific aspects of an empirical study, designed to focus on the correlation between the student's self-esteem and the success of learning, as an important feature, valued by the practice of the learning profession.

Key words: academic performance, learning profession, self-esteem, succes of learning

Introduction of the main concepts

The recent researches in education, concerning the investigation of the relationships in the classroom, draw our attention to a new approach: each school partner, teacher and student, carries out a profession: namely, the teaching profession, socially and legally recognized and the learning profession, a tangible one, but recognized only in theory. Ideally, the teaching profession means that the teacher must train and educate the student, while the learning profession means learning, which is the main duty of the student! While the teaching profession is recognised and socially valued in different ways across European countries, the learning profession is still not

* Associate Professor Nicoleta Litoiu, Ph.D., tel. +40 726 335 340
E-mail address: litoiu.nicoleta@gmail.com

recognized by the labour sociology, even if it meets the necessary accepted requirements, namely: to practice a profession is a way of being recognized by society, acting within an organization and being part of that organization without having the outcomes or the optimum efficiency of one's activities clearly defined. The learning process is always possible, but not under any circumstances. Why should the learning profession not be an example of what a human being can learn under certain circumstances of an educational environment? Society, regardless of its political, social and economic nature, has a steady answer in this respect: any human being is "convicted" to learn, but the learning profession means to learn! The learning profession is teaching every day in schools, practising daily in a variety of educational contexts, achieving success in close connection to "the playing by the rules" concept. In line with this, "excellence" in performance means the qualified way of achieving the concept of "learning profession" (Perrenoud, 1996, p. 16). From this perspective and in connection to the concept of learning profession, the concept of self-esteem has occurred in education and psychology experts' debates over the last fifty years, the social responsibility and the co-participation of the student to the educational process representing an important link between the two concepts. One of the mostly used definitions of the concept of self-esteem was proposed by Rosenberg and other experts in social sciences, in the early sixties. They defined the concept of self-esteem as a "stable and holistic evaluation of your own personality" (global self-esteem). Another definition of the concept takes into consideration the "specific self-assessments and evaluations on different and relevant dimensions of personality' development, such as: self-assessment of the physical attractiveness, popularity, the competency in a specific domain etc." (Brown and Suls, 1993, pp. 27–32).

The theory and the practice of the domain consider that the development of the concept of self-esteem is significantly influenced by two relevant aspects for our personality: self-image and self-respect (Branden, 1995; Brown and Suls, 1993). Self-image plays an important role in setting-up the general framework of our relationships with the people around, influencing the way in which a person appreciates others and is appreciated by them. The other aspect, the concept of self-respect is developed according to self-consciousness, turning into a defender of this delicate component of personality. At the same time, the theorists of the domain view the concept of self-esteem as a process of evolution, as well as of learning. We are not born with a high or low level of self-esteem, but we learn from experience and relationships how to build and develop self-esteem, as a correlation between external influences generated by the environment, the educational process and the specific determination of each person in his/her own development (Branden, 1995; Brown and Suls, 1993; Lavoie, 2002).

The learning profession

While the learning profession looks like an unusual idea, it fulfils several characteristics which particularize it among the other professions: the choice for it is not made freely, it rather represents a duty well recognized and socially needed; it is a profession which is continuously practised under the supervision of a specialized trainer and, finally, this profession involves an assessment of the student's performance, culture, intelligence and attitude. Like in every labour system, practicing this profession implies external rewards and punishments (grades, competitions, graduation, penalties) aimed to motivate the student for learning; a set of tasks, exercises, projects and creative activities; didactic control and formal and informal assessment, as well as bureaucratic relationships between teachers and students, each of them pointing out their specific role, profession and the area of action (Perrenoud, 1996, p. 18). At the same time, however, scholarship represents a long educational route which makes the long practise of the profession by the student generate some perverse effects, for example an external motivation of learning for grades. From this point of view, the student will always be tempted to force the limits of the teacher's tolerance in terms of practicing his/her profession: absenteeism, discipline issues, attitude towards the task etc. In order to survive in the school environment, the student should figure out the entire informal code which facilitates a good relationship with the teacher. This code, as part of the learning profession, includes implicit norms, strategies and models applied in the classroom. However, nobody talks transparently about them. Goffman (1988) states that in order to ensure his survival in the school organization the student "must become dissident or secretive, keeping up appearances as much as needed to keep the good relationships with the teacher or to protect his own interests (Hammersley, 1994, p. 184). In this way, the student learns very quickly to lead a double life, knowing that if he acts as a good student then the teacher will have confidence in him. The learning profession represents, in fact, a holistic concept comprising certain basic elements: the relationship between family and school, modern education, assessment theory and practice, educational communication, the type of classroom activities etc. We shall further attempt to provide a better explanation for this concept, by highlighting some of the already mentioned issues.

In our attempt to establish what "the learning profession" really means, it would be interesting to underline the fact that, in this case, the notion of "profession" is not understood from the academic or vocational qualifications perspective, but rather from the "disciplines" point of view, which allow the student to gain a common sense about the activity, in terms of thinking schemes, perception and action. Consequently, the learning profession is acquired in school and practiced

on a daily basis in a variety of educational contexts. From this point of view, academic excellence seems to be, in practice, the qualified way to exercise the learning profession (Husen and Postletwaite, 1994). Every small but well-organized, social group, such as a group of students, builds its own culture, based on *savoir* and *savoir-faire*, rules and values, beliefs and mutual representations which contribute to the development of collective identity and affiliation feeling. Annually, during his educational career, the student should make the effort to adapt himself not only to a new school program, a new schedule but also to the culture of a new group, the requirements of a new teacher, a new teaching style and a new type of educational activities. The hazard decides whether, along the schooling period, the student benefits from a relative continuity of the type of activities or teaching style or, on the contrary, lives completely different, sometimes even contradictory experiences, by meeting different teachers with different teaching strategies and educational paradigms (Hammersley, 1994; Wragg, 1999). During his school career, the student experiences the learning profession, aiming to achieve success, although success may embody different things, depending on the meaning attributed to it by the student: to pass examinations; to keep up appearances; to play with the rules; to behave properly etc. (Perrenoud, 1996). In this way, we open the discussion on the educational contract, as well as on the pedagogical relationship, in which full transparency is neither possible nor wanted by both teacher and student alike. None of the two is interested in revealing all those aspects which define the “internal affairs” of a school, or to allow outsiders into the school to see the inside. The entire dimension, more or less hidden, which becomes more and more complex depends, in the end, on the initiation of the student in what we call “the learning profession”. The learning profession implies, among others, the student’s habit of being constantly assessed, compared, ordered and placed in different hierarchies of performance. In this context, communication needs a special attention. Any intervention of the student is evaluated in different ways, using different marks, from “less interesting” or “well organized” to comments, critiques and challenges (Perrenoud, 1996, p. 61). In this way, the student learns in school that knowledge and skills are resources for exerting power, given the fact that the asymmetry of the teacher-student relationship was “convicted”, almost sixteen years, to “speech deprivation”, on the ground that the one who speaks is the one who “knows more”.

School and the development of students’ personality

From another perspective, everything that happens in the school is evaluated by using the students’ performance and their competencies’ level of development. Communication represents

one of the most important dimensions of the teacher-student relationship. Its way of expression is multiple, sometimes contradictory, but very often hidden or implicit. To try to make a list of all the communication phenomena in the classroom is, obviously, difficult without taking into account several types of communication which are usually forgotten when one investigates a group of students: communication which generates stress; useless, redundancy and encoded communication. Classroom communication is determined and influenced by many variables, including the pedagogical relationship, the educational contract, the particular conditions of the learning profession as well as of the teaching one. At the same time, communication suffers because of multiple contradictory elements, sometimes difficult to define. Communication represents life itself from which complexity is borrowed (Perrenoud, 1996, p. 52).

At the same time, classroom communication reveals cultural – sometimes significant – cultural differences, between teacher and students, as well as among different students coming from different families and social environments. Those differences are diverse, but they manifest themselves especially in terms of speech and communication. Speech differs according to social class. This fact was also highlighted by educational sociologists - Bourdieu, Passeron, Bernstein, in their linguistic analyses (Wragg, 1999).

A question still remains under debate in recent years: *Does the level of development of general and transversal competencies determine a high level of involvement, especially increased self-esteem or vice versa?* Experts in educational sciences and psychology tend to believe that both statements are true. Obviously, there is a dynamic relationship between them. Making an attempt to focus only on self-esteem or self-confidence, as important feature in the development of the student's personality profile, we may share the same opinion as Richard Lavoie, who notes that the educator has to pay special attention and understand the fact that an increased level of positive self-esteem is not only a prerequisite, but also a consequence of academic performance and success. Following the same author, "self-esteem is commonly defined as the belief that a person is accepted, connected, unique, powerful, and capable. (...) Because self-esteem is a feeling - not a skill - it can only be measured by observing the way in which a person acts or behaves." This is why, according to Lavoie's observations (2002), we try to operationalize the concepts and describe the specific characteristics of the profile of both types of personalities, namely students with high self-esteem and, respectively, low self-esteem, as follows: (i) students with a high level of self-esteem are able to influence others' opinions or behaviours in a positive way, communicate feelings and emotions in a variety of situations, accept responsibilities and communicate positive feelings about themselves, approach new situations in a positive and

confident manner whereas (ii) students with a low level of self-esteem, who are mainly able to be overly dependent, demonstrate an excessive need for acceptance, have difficulty in making decisions, become easily defensive and are highly vulnerable to peer pressure.

Summarizing, we may assume that our general level of competency is influenced by the level of self-esteem, as a major factor impacting our positive actions and behaviours, being responsible for our reactions in order for us to facilitate adaptation to real life situations.

The *general aim* of the empirical study was to investigate the correlation between self-esteem and the success of learning, in the general context of practicing the learning profession. From this perspective, the study focuses on the concept of self-esteem and its practical benefits for learning, in order to help students find out the right academic route and career path.

Objectives and Hypotheses

According to the general aim, we have identified the following research objectives:

O1: the investigation of the students' opinion on the concept of "self-esteem";

O2: the investigation of the students' opinion on the concept of "self-evaluation", closely related to the capacity to assess their own abilities and personal qualities, according to the Rosenberg Scale;

O3: the analysis of the operational model of determination between the level of self-esteem and the success of learning.

Also, very important for our research study are the hypotheses listed below.

H1. A high level of the students' self-esteem directly influences the students' academic route in the direction of continuing their bachelor's studies with master and doctoral studies.

H2. The nature of the motivation for continuing studies is most often internal, acting as a support for further personal and professional development.

H3. In the dynamic relationship existing between self-esteem and competency development, the attitude of learning directly influences the level of academic performance.

Methodology

To carry out this research, numerous elements and criteria were reconsidered, as well as other correlated characteristics. The design of our quite small research needed, among various procedures, the clear definition of the scope and objectives of the research, in order to identify the independent and dependent variables involved. The independent variables concerning the

students were: age, gender, and type of studies/ faculty specialization. The dependent variables were: attitudes, motivation, level of self-esteem, behaviour cliché and the definition of learning success-failure.

Participants and the data collection instruments

The target group of this study comprised students from our technical university, attending different specializations at different faculties, enrolled in the bachelor cycle of studies. Other characteristics of the group were the age and the gender, with the majority formed by male because of their large representation among our students of university.

The data collection instrument was applied to 123 students (21 female and 102 male), from the Faculty of Materials Science and Engineering and the Faculty of Electronics and Telecommunications (Table 1). Regarding the principles of the research methodology, special attention was given to the fact that the participants in this empirical research did not form a representative sample. Therefore, the conclusions of this investigation cannot be generally assumed, having only an internal theoretical and practical value.

Table 1. *The structure of the target group depending on the research variables*

Students		
Bachelor study programme	123	100%
Female	21	17.07%
Male	102	82.93%
Total	123	100%
19-24 years old	109	88.62%
25-35 years old	14	11.38%
Total	123	100.00%

The empirical study has implied the administration of two complementary data collection instruments, namely the Rosenberg scale, the most frequently used scale for measuring the level of self-esteem, completed by the Single Item Self-Esteem Scale (SISE). Both scales are validated for Romanian population use, being recognized as valuable instruments in a very large range of educational and psychological studies.

The Rosenberg Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) consists of ten items, as follows:

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times, I think I am no good at all.
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel that I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I certainly felt useless at times.
7. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Each item has been evaluated using a four dimensions Likert scale format, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. In addition to the administration of the Rosenberg scale, we have applied the Single Item Self-Esteem Scale (SISE), as a rapid alternative, having a similar predictive value, in order for us to check the truth of the answers obtained after the first test. As far as the SISE administration is concerned, the single item designed was “*I have a high level of self-esteem*”, and the expected answers have been discriminated on a Likert scale of five dimensions, starting from strongly agree to strongly disagree. We need to mention the fact that the administered data collection instruments (the Rosenberg Scale and SISE) have had a very good internal consistency coefficient, as described below in Table 2.

Table 2. *The internal consistency of the data collection instruments*

Data collection instruments	Alpha – Chronbach Coefficient
Rosenberg Scale	0,81
Single Item Self-Esteem Scale (SISE)	0,78

Findings and results

Based on the data analysis of the tests, we shall further present the results, taking into consideration the application of both instruments to the same target group, with a gap of few days between the applications. Comparing the results in the table below, it is obvious that the respondents show more self-confidence when answering the single-item self-esteem scale, as follows (Table 3).

Table 3. *The level of self-esteem based on the data collection analysis*

Data collection instruments	High level of self-esteem	Medium level of self-esteem	Low level of self-esteem
Rosenberg scale	27%	42%	31%
SISE	36%	51%	13%

It is not surprising that the students have become more confident regarding their self-esteem image, when answering a single item, asking them only to assess their own level of self-esteem. The small discrepancy between the results registered after the Rosenberg Scale and the SISE Scale is possibly due to everyone's level of development of the self-evaluation capacity. Taking into consideration that this ability of self-evaluation needs time and systematic learning opportunities for development and practice, it is possible for some of the students to have overestimated their level of self-esteem. In this respect, the Rosenberg Scale, including 10 items and specific control keys for them, may support them in providing more accurate answers than the SISE Scale. However, the results show that the majority of the investigated students have a positive opinion about themselves and their performances.

According to a qualitative pattern of interpretation, the level of self-esteem is closely correlated to the attitude of learning and success, highlighting the basis for the further development of professional and personal objectives. Given the above, we consider that the first hypothesis has been confirmed, the students being directly influenced in their decision to continue their academic route of studies by the level of self-esteem. At the same time, the correlation of motivation to the further professional and personal development (hypothesis no. 2) has neither been confirmed nor infirmed by the results of the tests, additional longitudinal studies being required to collect information from the same target group at different stages of evolution, in each academic year until their graduation. As far as the third hypothesis is concerned, investigating the relationship between the attitude towards learning and the level of academic performance, the empirical study proposes a holistic approach, which favours a qualitative rather than quantitative interpretation of data. From this perspective, the idea of the students' responsibility for their learning process and results, in terms of academic performance, implies a more sustained motivation and students' confidence in their own potential and ability to succeed.

Conclusions

Following the analysis and interpretation of the data resulted from the data collection instruments applied, several conclusions have been emphasized, briefly presented below. Two out of the three hypotheses have been confirmed by the study' results, underlying the correlations between self-esteem and academic performance, on the one hand, and the attitude towards learning, on the other hand.

In order to efficiently explore the second hypothesis, there resulted the need to develop a longitudinal study, which provides the opportunity to retest the students of the target group in

each academic year of their educational route during the licence cycle and after. In this way, it is possible to set up a complete and more objective picture of the development of self-esteem level, in terms of monitoring the students' progress.

The need to diversify the methodology of the research and the variables involved, specific to the students, as participants in this empirical study. It would be a good idea to reinforce the value of the data collection instruments we already administered, such as the Rosenberg Scale and SISE Scale, with interviews and/or focus-groups, in order to collect additional information about the social, economic and family background. These data are aimed at enriching the already shaped big picture, bringing new approaches and perspectives in a holistic way of correlations, interpretation and data analysis pattern.

The major role played by the career counselling services, provided by the Career Counselling and Guidance Centre of the University. Using this opportunity, the students could have benefited from specialised support and appropriate assistance during the learning process in order to make the right decisions, not only concerning the academic route, but also the process of insertion on the labour market. In this way, career counselling could become another dependent variable of the research, emphasising the relationship between the learning styles and the professional and personal performance and competences vs. the level of self-esteem of each student.

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