

Perceptions of Competence in a Study with Children and Adolescents from Elementary School

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Abstract: The objective of this study was to investigate how children (96 children from elementary public school) perceived their competence in the different domains of human behavior. The Perceived Competence Scale was used. The results suggested that: a) older children showed lower levels of perceived competence; b) boys and girls perceived competence in the different domains were similar; c) cognitive perceptions of competence were lower in older children as well as in children that repeated school year; e, d) the lower perceptions of cognitive competence appears have no effect in the perceptions of competence in the others domains.

Keywords: Perception. Competency-based education. Children.

1 INTRODUCTION

During the development process, the individual seeks to relate efficiently with the environment, becoming more competent. The quality of these interactions will lead the child to obtain autonomy and self-confidence in his skills and, consequently, to perceive himself or herself as competent (WHITE, 1959; HARTER, 1978, 1985, 1992). The competence perceived, understood as judgment expressed by the individual related to a capacity realized (VALENTINI, 2002a) can be expressed by the child during childhood in specific domains of human behavior (cognitive, social or motor), therefore being multidimensional. However, the same can change due to experiences, depending on their achievements. This multidimensional approach allows verifying in which domain the child invested, or is investing, greater energy and effort to become competent.

The higher the level of realizations or achievements, the more likely will the individual perceive himself or herself as competent in the specific domain in which his or her action was efficient in the environment (HARTER, 1978, 1984, 1992, 1999), leading the individual to feel pleasure in discovering what he or she can do well (GALLAHUE, 2001). Positive perceptions of competence are influenced by the individual's characteristics (age, gender, motivation) in interaction with the values of socializing agents (parents, peers, teachers) and,

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by how the socializing agents respond to the efforts of children in the specific contexts of learning in which they are socially inserted (HARTER, 1978). These factors are decisive in the development of competence itself, in the trust in one's own ability to effectively interact in the environment, therefore strengthening self-esteem and self-concept (GALLAHUE, 2001; VALENTINI, 2007; VIEIRA et al., 1997).

2 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE

The socialization process of the child differs considering the characteristics pertinent to the different age ranges, gender and the intrinsic motivation of the child itself on performing different tasks. With regard to **age**, several studies suggest that younger children overestimate their competences due to the little experience in making autonomous judgments, being that judgment related to abilities and aptitudes is completely based on the social feedback that generally comes from parents and teachers. Older children (over 10 years) begin to consider their own expectations of social standards, as well as the social feedback provided by important people, such as the peers, in the elaboration of their judgment. This way, in older children, feelings of competence become self-determined and more realistic with regard to their own competences, that is, older children tend to not overestimate their competences (GALLAHUE, 2001; GOODWAY; RUDISILL, 1996; HARTE, 1978; HARTE; CONNEL, 1984; MAÏANO et al., 2004; PIEK et al., 2006; RUDISILL et al., 1993; VIEIRA et al., 1997; ULRICH, 1987; WHITE, 1959). However, it is important to note that some studies show that older children are not necessarily accurate about their competences, and that they can have overestimated perceptions similar to those observed in childhood. This non-realistic perception results from the lack of parameters to judge competence itself, and can be prevalent when the context does not contribute toward helping them construct internal criteria to judge their abilities and capacities (RUDISILL et al., 1993; VALENTIN, 2007, 2002b).

Children and adolescents who overestimate their capacities tend to judge all tasks as easy. Judging a task as easy, to engage in the task and to experience failure results in low perceptions of competence. On the other hand, when the child and adolescent underestimate their current competence, he or she may have low expectations of future competence, having a negative influence on the results of his or her performance (RUDISILL et al., 1993; VALENTINI, 2007, 2002b). Negative experiences result in an inaccurate perception of competence and, this lack of accuracy can result in unreal expectations when facing a task.

Therefore, perceptions of competence for a certain domain can be regarded as the result of a history of achievements and failures. The child who perceives himself or herself as devalued due to constant failures uses the strategy of distancing deliberately from the activity, protecting his or her ability (HARTER, 1978). Also, when children perceive that they have difficulties in the task, it is possible that they avoid this experience, missing vital opportunities of developing new abilities (PIEK et al., 2006). Note however that the child's involvement in the learning process also depends on the value attributed by the child to the activity. Negative repercussions in self-concept only seem to occur when the child values the task and perceives that he or she is little competent in this task. When positive feelings of achievement are related to the task, the child shows endeavor and continuity in the participation (CARROL et al., 2001; VALENTINI, 2007).

Different socialization processes can influence the perceptions of boys and girls, reflecting the culture in which a child is inserted. Right from infancy, children are stereotyped according to gender in determined roles, including in the types of toys. Thus, the social stereotype reinforces that girls be passive and dependent, and that boys prove to be aggressive and independent, being more encouraged to practice broad motor and sports activities (CARDOSO; GAYA, 2004; PIEK et al, 2006; VALENTINI, 2007, 2002b). These stereotypes can restrict the perception that a girl has of herself, her motivation to develop abilities and consequently her real competence.

Among the various domains, differences between genders have been observed with regard to the perceptions of athletic competence, behavioral conduct, physical appearance, and overall self-worth (BOIS et al., 2005; DALEY, 2002; HARTEER, 1985; PIEK et al., 2006; RUDISILL et al.; 1993). In athletic skill, boys usually show more positive perceptions compared to girls (CARROLL; LOUMIDIS, 2001; MAÏANO et al., 2004). Carroll & Loumidis (2001) and BOIS et al. (2005) state that the higher perception of boys can result from the greater participation and competence of boys in physical activities. Boys participate more in terms of time and in number of weekly sessions. Daley (2002), although reinforcing this view, also suggests that the difference between boys and girls is related to their different reasons for practicing exercises. Female participation tends to be motivated by the search for entertainment, feeling well and the search and maintenance of friendships, while boys actually seek to compete and become competent. Also, traditionally, boys receive more support from adult family members to be involved in sports (HARTER, 1985, 1992).

With regard to perceptions in relation to physical appearance, the differences in gender can be associated with the typical psychological changes that occur in girls during

adolescence (DALEY, 2002). Physical appearance can play a more significant role in girls than in boys (DALEY, 2002; PIEK et al., 2006). According to these researchers, for girls, to have a good appearance or to be beautiful, proves to be a more important value, while for boys, showing abilities tends to be considered more important. Piek et al (2006) also state that due to the great need to conform to the standards of the group during adolescence, issues pertaining to the style of dressing and personal appearance would have a greater impact on overall self-worth and in the perception of greater acceptance of the behavioral conduct of girls.

The feeling of competence creates an impact on the **intrinsic motivation** and autonomous judgment of the child. The child who perceives himself or herself as competent is more intrinsically motivated to perform tasks that challenge him or her to attain self-referenced goals, while the one who considers himself or herself little competent tends to avoid challenging situations and engage in tasks not necessarily with own goals to be attained (DECI, 1998; HARTER; CONNEL, 1984). The goals that lead the child to engage in different activities are often from adults who live with the child and from his or her peers. This external control in the performance of the task, when excessive, reduces intrinsic motivation and endeavor in the activities, with negative repercussion on the carrying out of any activity that needs creativity, conceptual understanding or flexible solving of problems (DECI, 1998; HARTER, 1985; VALENTINI, 2007, 2002a; WHITE, 1959).

Furthermore, this child who shows little intrinsic motivation is probably less aware of his or her competence due to having few previous experiences and, during his or her experiences, received little support from significant others (VALENTINI, 2007, 2002b). The need to feel competent is characteristic of an intrinsically motivated behavior; therefore, the motivation should be understood as the result of significant experiences in contexts that promote higher levels of self-confidence (VALENTINI, 2006). When opportunities to experience ideal challenges are offered, the child, on overcoming these challenges, strengthens his or her perceived competence and consequently becomes more competent and motivated to remain in the task (DALEY, 2002 NEVES; BORUCHOVITCH, 2004; VALENTINI, 2007).

3 SOCIALIZING AGENTS AND THE CONTEXT OF THE CHILD

The previous history of child socialization leads the child to become interested in and to interact in different tasks, accepting new challenges and being motivated to acquire new

skills. The **learning environment** and how the teacher performs and presents the activities are pointed out as determinant factors in the development of perceptions of competence (CARDOSO; GAYA, 2004; CARROL; LOUMIDIS, 2001; DALEY, 2002; FONSECA, 2004; GALLAHUE, 2001; KLINT; WEISS, 1987; NEVES; BORUCHOVITCH, 2004; VALENTINI, 2002a, 2002b; VALENTINI; TOIGO, 2004; VIEIRA et al., 1997; WEISS, 2004). A positive self-evaluation is expressed by children and youngsters when suitable experiences, opportunity for practice, instruction and encouragement from significant others are provided (VALENTINI, 2007, 2002b).

The methodological procedures used by the teacher also influence the way in which the students position themselves before the school demands. When the teacher also recognizes the goals that children establish for their learning, the teacher proposes ideal questionings and challenges, avoids imposing social comparison of performance, adapts the methodological proposal to the needs, interests and individual characteristics of the students, creating a context that prioritizes equality, competence and positive self-concept (FONSECA, 2004; VALENTINI, 2007; VALENTINI; TOIGO, 2004). The more the child integrates positively to the school environment, the more he or she values the experiences in this environment and the more this environment becomes significant to the child (VALENTINI, 2007).

Oftentimes, changes in the child's structure of references (grades, groups, methodologies and teachers) can have a negative repercussion in the way the child perceives himself or herself. Note also that as the students advance in the school grades, the school environment becomes more personal and evaluative; competition is highlighted through comparison of grades and concepts, guiding children and adolescents to direct themselves toward extrinsic obtainment of pre-established standards (HARTER, 1992).

In any learning environment, the answers of the **socializing agents** (parents, teachers, experts, siblings) related to the success or failure of the child in performing an activity has impact on the child's perceptions of competence. The feedback from the parents, teachers or friends serve as source of references about the suitability of the individual's performance (HARTER 1978, 1992), with a positive or negative effect on the self-concept depending on the importance and value given by the child to this experience and this individual. Children and adolescents interiorize a system of goals through domains that define the importance of success in a certain activity. In this experience, the approval of others becomes internally represented, and converted into a self parameter of approval or non-approval (VIEIRA et al., 1997).

Therefore, considering that the achievements are influenced by the perceptions of competence of the individual, and these in turn by the personal characteristics in response to experiences of success in the context of learning and the positive action of socializing agents in the life of the child, this study has as objectives investigating: a) the perceptions of school competences; b) the differences with regard to the series, ages and gender in the perceptions of school competence; c) the influence of school failure in the perceptions of school competence; d) the relations between the various domains of competence expressed by students. The following hypotheses were established: a) younger students (8 to 10 years) from initial grades have higher levels of perception of competence, in the various domains, compared to older students (11 to 12 years and 13 to 14 years) and from more advanced grades; b) boys and girls show differentiation in the levels of perceptions of competence; c) students who repeat show perceptions of competence lower than students who do not repeat; d) students with high perception of competence in a specific domain show high perception of competence in the other domains; e) students with low perception of competence in a specific domain show low perception of competence in other domains.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

A total of 96 children (49 boys and 47 girls) took part in this descriptive, comparative, transversal and correlation survey (THOMAS; NELSON, 2002), from public schools with ages between 8 to 14 years. The sample was intentional and the age and gender distribution occurred according to the configuration presented by the groups from the schools surveyed. For comparison in the ages, three groups from different age groups were formed for this study (from 8 to 10 years / from 11 to 12 years / from 13 to 14 years). This survey was approved by the institutional review board of Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), process no. 2003109 and only children whose parents returned the signed informed consent form took part.

3.2 INSTRUMENT

To evaluate the perception of competence, The Self-Perception Profile for Children was used (HARTER, 1985), validated for use with Brazilian children by Villwock (2006). The scale is made up of six independent sub-scales, determining five specific domains, as well as the overall self-worth: (1) Scholastic Competence (cognitive); (2) Social Acceptance (socio-

affective); (3) Athletic Competence (motor skills); (4) Physical Appearance (level of satisfaction with one's appearance); (5) Behavioral Conduct (how one acts); (6) Overall Self-Worth (how much the child likes himself or herself). Each one of the six subscales is made up of six items, constituting a total of 36 questions. The score of each item in the scale can vary from 1 to 4. Where value "1" indicates a low perception of competence, and value "4" shows a high perception of competence.

3.3 PROCEDURES

With the aim of exposing the procedures to administer the questionnaire, a prior contact was made with the schools through presentation letters and interviews with their directors. After acceptance by the parents or legal guardians, the researcher started collecting data. The questionnaire was conducted individually by the researcher. First, a question of example was made, where the children were requested to decide which of the two children in the model they identified with the most, that is, the option that best matched themselves, to then mark the description chosen. The numerical value corresponding to the choice of each child was recorded in the score sheet for individual answers of the competence perception scale.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, the categorization of competence perceived as high, moderate and low was based on the study by Harter et al. (1992): using means and standard deviations; for perception of high competence (over $M + 1 SD$); perception of moderate competence ($M - 1 SD$ & $M + 1 SD$); and perception of low competence (below $M - 1 SD$). For comparisons in the various ages and grades, variance analyses (ANOVA) and Tukey post hoc tests were used. To compare the genders, t-independent tests. The significance level equal to or less than $p=0.05$ was adopted. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test showed that the sample was distributed normally ($p>0.05$), enabling application of parametric tests (THOMAS; NELSON, 2002).

5 RESULTS

The participants, in general, showed moderate levels of perception of scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, behavioral conduct

and overall self-worth. The overall self-worth was the only domain that approached a high level of perception (see Table 1 for means in the subscales of perception of competence for the sample total, gender, age, grades and status or not of approval).

Table 1: Means of Competence Perceived in the various Subscales and Variables

	Scholastic Competence	Social Acceptance	Athletic Competence	Physical Appearance	Behavioral Conduct	Overall Self-Worth
Total	2.75	2.89	2.78	3.04	2.79	3.21
Grades						
4th grade	2.87	3.22	3.04	3.30	2.95	3.45
5th grade	2.87	2.81	2.62	3.12	3.10	3.31
6th grade	2.61	2.82	2.78	2.87	2.51	3.05
Repeating	2.55	2.88	2.69	3.00	2.68	3.22
Non-repeating	2.88	2.91	2.83	3.06	2.86	3.21
Age Groups						
8 to 10 years	2.97	3.06	2.81	3.31	3.17	3.48
11 and 12 years	2.70	2.78	2.77	2.93	2.66	3.07
13 and 14 years	2.16	2.93	2.70	2.64	2.16	3.12
Gender						
Male	2.74	2.90	2.82	3.12	2.67	3.19
Female	2.75	2.88	2.73	2.95	2.93	3.24

5.1 COMPARISON OF PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE IN THE AGE GROUPS

Significant differences were observed in perceptions of scholastic competence ($F(2,93)=6.49$; $p=0.002$), physical appearance ($F(2,93)=3.85$; $p=0.02$), behavioral conduct, ($F(2,93)=9.77$; $p=0.000$) and overall self-worth ($F(2,93)=4.83$; $p=0.01$) in the different age groups. Non-significant results were observed for social acceptance ($F(2,93)=2.14$; $p=0.12$) & athletic competence ($F(2,93)=0.07$; $p=0.92$).

Tukey post hoc tests indicate that for scholastic competence, there were significant differences in the perceptions of children aged 8 to 10 years and adolescents aged 13 to 14 years ($p=0.002$). The children in the age range of 8 to 10 years ($M=2.97$, $DP=0.49$) showed higher rates of perception of scholastic competence compared to students in the age range of 13 to 14 years ($M=2.16$, $DP=0.64$). Still in this same domain, the children aged 11 and 12 years ($M=2.70$, $SD=0.63$) also showed higher rates compared to the adolescents aged 13 and 14 years ($M=2.16$, $SD=0.64$). The second domain that showed significant differences ($p=0.02$) was physical appearance, once again the children between 8 and 10 years of age

($M=3.31$, $SD=0.59$) showed higher rates compared to the older children, aged 11 and 12 years ($M=2.93$, $SD=0.81$) and youngsters aged 13 and 14 years ($M=2.64$, $SD=0.78$). The levels of perceived competence shown by the younger children, aged 8 to 10 years ($M=3.17$, $SD=0.62$), in the variable behavioral conduct ($p=0.000$) were also higher compared to the levels shown by the two age groups: 11 and 12 years ($M=2.66$, $SD=0.74$) & 13 and 14 years ($M=2.16$, $SD=0.28$). Significant differences ($p=0.01$) were also found for overall self-worth. In this domain, the children aged 8 to 10 years showed higher rates ($M=3.48$, $SD=0.46$) compared to youngsters aged 13 and 14 years ($M=3.12$, $SD=0.65$). These results support this study's hypothesis that expected to find higher levels of perception of competence in younger children.

5.2 COMPARISON OF PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE IN THE GRADES

Significant differences were noticed among children from different grades with regard to the perceptions of social acceptance ($F(2,93)=3.29$; $p=0.04$), behavioral conduct ($F(2,93)=7.58$; $p=0.001$), and overall self-worth, ($F(2,93)=3.25$; $p=0.04$). No significant results were found for scholastic competence ($F(2,93)=2.12$; $p=0.12$), athletic competence ($F(2,93)=2.18$; $p=0.11$) and physical appearance ($F(2,93)=2.44$; $p=0.09$). A tendency toward significance was observed with relation to physical appearance ($p=0.09$). Since the ANOVA test was significant for social acceptance, behavioral conduct and overall self-worth, continuity tests were conducted.

Tukey post hoc tests show that for social acceptance, significant differences were noticed in the perceptions of competence of children from the fourth and fifth ($p=0.05$) and fourth and sixth ($p=0.04$) grade. Children from the fourth grade ($M=3.22$, $SD=0.56$) showed higher rates of social acceptance compared to children from the fifth ($M=2.81$, $SD=0.56$) and sixth grades ($M=2.82$, $SD=0.65$). With regard to behavioral conduct, significant differences were noticed between the fourth and sixth grades ($p=0.05$). Children from the fourth grade ($M=2.95$, $SD=0.62$) showed higher levels of behavioral conduct compared to children from the sixth grade ($M=2.51$, $SD=0.69$). With regard to overall self-worth, significant differences were noticed between the fourth and sixth grades ($p=0.05$). Children from the fourth grade ($M=3.45$, $SD=0.46$) showed perceptions of overall self-worth higher than children from the sixth grade ($M=3.05$, $SD=0.67$). These results confirm the hypothesis established that children in higher grades showed lower levels of perception of competence.

5.3 COMPARISON OF PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE IN GENDER

Independent t-test was used to investigate possible differences in the perceptions of competence with regard to gender. The statistical results did not show significant differences between the genders in the different subscales of perception of competence. Boys and girls perceive themselves similarly with regard to scholastic competence ($t(94)=0.09$, $p=0.92$), social acceptance ($t(94)=0.19$, $p=0.84$), athletic competence ($t(94)=0.65$, $p=0.51$), physical appearance ($t(94)=1.07$, $p=0.28$) and overall self-worth ($t(94)=0.39$, $p=0.69$). Only behavioral conduct showed a tendency toward significance in the results ($t(94)=1.76$, $p=0.08$). Note that girls tend to perceive themselves with a more socially-adequate behavioral conduct ($M=2.93$, $SD=0.71$) than boys ($M=2.67$, $SD=0.74$), although this result is not significant. The results with regard to gender do not support the hypothesis established in this study, which generally expected to find differences between boys and girls in the perception of competence.

5.4 COMPARISONS OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE WITH RELATION TO REPEATING AND NON-REPEATING GROUPS

To investigate the possibility of differences in the perceptions of competence between repeating and non-repeating students, the independent t-test was used. The results of the statistical analysis showed significant difference in the domain of scholastic competence ($t(94)=2.59$, $p=0.01$), such that repeating students ($M=2.55$, $SD=0.71$) tend to perceive their scholastic competence at a lower level compared to non-repeating students ($M=2.88$, $SD=0.53$). The repeating students did not show significant differences compared to non-repeating students in the variables: social acceptance ($t(94)=0.36$, $p=0.71$), athletic competence ($t(94)=1.02$, $p=0.30$), physical appearance ($t(94)=0.39$, $p=0.69$), behavioral conduct ($t(94)=1.18$, $p=0.24$) and overall self-worth ($t(94)=0.07$, $p=0.93$).

5.6 RELATIONS BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOLASTIC COMPETENCE AND OTHER PERCEPTION OF COMPETENCE DOMAINS

Since the perception of scholastic competence was, in the comparisons of groups, the domain of perception of competence that showed the highest difference, correlations between this and the other domains were conducted using Pearson's correlation in general of the sample and in the different age groups. For all children from the sample, there were significant correlations between scholastic competence and physical appearance, $r=0.19$, $p=0.03$ (positive and mild); scholastic competence and behavioral conduct, $r=0.47$, $p=0.000$

(positive and moderate); and scholastic competence and overall self-worth, $r=0.23$, $p=0.01$ (positive and mild). A tendency toward significance was observed between scholastic competence and athletic competence, $r=0.14$, $p=0.07$ (positive and mild), and a non-significant correlation between scholastic competence and social acceptance, $r=0.02$, $p=0.39$ (negative and mild correlation).

In the different age groups, correlations were found for: (1) the age group 8-10 years, between scholastic competence and behavioral conduct, $r=0.43$, $p=0.006$ (positive and moderate); between scholastic competence and athletic competence, $r=0.29$, $p=0.01$ (positive and mild); between scholastic competence and physical appearance, $r=0.25$, $p=0.03$ (positive and mild); between scholastic competence and behavioral conduct, $r=0.39$, $p=0.001$ (positive and moderate); (2) the age group 11-12 years between scholastic competence and overall self-worth, $r=0.19$, $p=0.08$, a significant correlation (positive and mild); (3) and finally, the age group 13-14 years did not show any significant correlation between scholastic competence and the other perception of competence domains. The other correlations in the age groups were not significant.

5.7 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The children from the sample of this study showed moderate levels of perception in the scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, behavioral conduct and overall self-worth domains. The levels of perception of competence of this study are similar to the results obtained by other studies conducted (CHEN et al., 2004; VALENTINI, 2002b; VILLWOCK, 2006), however differing from the study by Vieira et al (1997). In the study by Vieira et al. (1997), the researchers found lower values of scholastic competence, social acceptance and athletic competence compared to the present study. The moderate levels of perceived competence of the present study are in line with the results of Villwock (2006) in children (between 8 and 10 years) from the public school network of São Leopoldo municipality (Rio Grande do Sul State); with the results of Valentini (2002b) with children aged 5 to 10 years in public schools of Porto Alegre; and with the results of Chen et al. (2004) with children from the 6th and 7th grades of elementary education.

In the results of this study, it was noticed that the plateau was in the perceptions, as of 8 years of age, described by several researchers (HARTER, 1985; RUDISILL et al., 1993; ULRICH, 1987). Stabilization of perceived competence was observed in children aged 9 to 11 years, in this study the plateau is evidenced strongly as of 11 years of age. This plateau shows

that the child gradually acquires the cognitive ability to consider and evaluate the various factors that influence his or her performances, such as, for example, the feedback from significant others, past experiences, achievements or failures in them, the types of tasks, and personal interaction in the process. Stabilization of perceptions occurs, in general, simultaneously with increase in the actual competence of the child, guiding the child to become more accurate in his or her judgments and evaluations, remaining in a moderate level of perception of competence, a fact observed in this study. Children and adolescents who know their abilities and difficulties are more prone to adequately regulate their behavior (CHEN et al., 2004); awareness of the actual abilities and skills of an individual is important to conduct an adequate self-evaluation and in the establishment of achievement strategies (VALENTINI, 2002b).

During this same transition period, there is a reduction in the family's influence, and the group of peers gains more force and importance, likewise teachers and other adults slowly the power of persuasion over the child and influence in their perceived competence. This period of development has therefore been considered fundamental for the strengthening of perceptions of competence because it is in this period that the child shows an awareness of the individual potentialities and capacities, establishing parameters for his or her future performance (VALENTINI, 2002b).

5.8 PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE IN THE AGE GROUPS

The comparisons of the perceptions of competence in the age groups showed significant differences, specifically in the scholastic competence subscales, physical appearance, behavioral conduct and overall self-worth. The data shows that the children aged 8 to 10 years showed higher levels of perception of competence, and as the ages increased, mainly in the age group of 13-14 years, the levels remained moderate, but with lower scores.

The higher levels of perception of competence of the younger children from this study suggest the lack of precision to judge the competences, which often results from the lack of self-evaluative criteria and parameters (VALENTINI, 2002b). Harter & Connell (1984) state that younger children have few experiences to make autonomous judgments, therefore, they need more from the feedback of an adult as a source of evaluation of their abilities (CARROLL; LOUMIDIS, 2001). It is only from increase of experiences in social circles that

children begin to assess their own competence in the comparison of their performance with that of their peers (PIEK et al, 2006). With the social comparison, children progressively become capable of synthesize the information received in a more accurate manner, obtaining from this process a more realistic judgment of their real capacities and competences (HARTER, 1985, 1987); and although the comparisons occur, the same are not guarantee that the children from the initial grades will show accuracy in identifying their levels of competence (ULRICH, 1987).

5.9 PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE IN THE SCHOOL GRADES

The comparisons in the grades show significant differences in the perceptions of social acceptance, behavioral conduct and overall self-worth. The students from the fourth grades compared to the students from other grades showed higher levels of perceptions of competence. One notes that as the children advance in the school grades, they begin to adapt to the demands of school culture, which reinforces an extrinsic orientation (HARTER, 1992); which has effective repercussion in the perceptions of competence since the children often have their self-worth associated with their grades. This adaptation of external parameters can possibly create a lack of interest in the learning process.

The differences shown among the grades, mainly between the 4th and 6th grades, seem to reveal that the children perceive that as the students advance in school, the learning environment becomes more impersonal, more formal and mainly more evaluative and competitive (HARTER, 1992). Harter (1992) enumerates a series of factors (school competition, importance in knowing the right answer, perceptions of teacher control)) that are pointed out by students as common within educational practices, which have a negative repercussion in the perceived competence when the child or adolescent does not meet this expectation. Chen et al. (2004) also suggest that moderate levels of perception of cognitive and social competence in children from 6th and 7th grades can reflect the difficulties of the child in view of a different stage of learning, and in view of the maturational changes occurring during this period.

5.10 LEVELS OF PERCEPTION OF COMPETENCE IN THE GENDERS

Comparisons were made among the levels of perception of competence in the genders. The statistical results did not show significant differences between boys and girls in the different subscales of perception of competence. The only domain to show a tendency toward significant difference was behavioral conduct. Here we note that girls tend to perceive themselves with more adequate social behavioral conduct than boys. Thus, girls from this study showed a tendency to accept more the way in which they behave, also perceiving themselves as more determined to act in order to avoid involvement in problems (HARTER, 1985).

The results of this study agree with other surveys conducted with Brazilian children (VALENTINI, 2002a, 2002b; VIEIRA et al., 1997). Valentini (2002b) suggests that when offered opportunities for adequate development of abilities, boys and girls show similar perceptions of competence. The similarities observed in this study between boys and girls can indicate a similar involvement of boys and girls in the different activities, as well as opportunities for interaction and equivalent expectations of the social context that surrounds them. However, more surveys are required to investigate the family and social context to accurately infer which factors are more strongly associated with these similarities.

5.11 LEVEL OF PERCEPTION OF COMPETENCE AMONG REPEATING AND NON-REPEATING STUDENTS

The comparisons made in the perceptions of competence between repeating and non-repeating groups showed a significant difference in the scholastic competence domain only. Repeating students perceived themselves as less cognitively competent compared to their non-repeating peers. The perceptions of competence for a determined domain can be regarded as the result of a history of achievements and failures (HARTER, 1978), in this study, the lowest levels of perception of scholastic competence reinforce this perspective since repetition is personally and socially understood as a failure by the child, adolescent and family members.

The social context strongly supports this understanding, often using the possibility of repetition as a form of pressure and social exclusion. The way in which the child perceives the school environment and its social organization (HARTER, 1984, 1992) is decisive in the construction of positive perceptions. If the child perceives this environment as threatening and experiences successive failures, this child will be more prone to perceive himself or herself less competent, failing to perform tasks and engaging in the activities; not engaging in the school activities has strong repercussion in the current competence of this child. One notes in the children and adolescents investigated a disbelief in their school abilities involving

cognition. Perceptions of competence at low levels are associated with not accepting challenges, progressive reduction in curiosity and weakening of independent learning (HARTER, 1992), all these factors being decisive in the construction, by the child, of his or her self-confidence in his or her ability to learn (VALENTINI, 2002b). On perceiving himself or herself little competent and not trusting in his or her abilities, the child and adolescent faces new experiences with insecurity or fear (GALLAHUE, 2001); and will hardly attempt to try new tasks with autonomy (RUDISILL et al., 1993); weakening the self-concept of this individual. It is therefore necessary to consider the influence of successful experiences, and to also pay attention to the effects of those situations where there is failure (HARTER, 1978). If these repeating children and adolescents continue to experience failures, the perception of lack of scholastic competence can be strengthened, probably having repercussion in school abandonment.

In the context investigated, the perceptions of competence of the repeating students of the other domains, as well as the overall self-worth do not seem to suffer the negative influence of the perceptions of scholastic competence. Although at first this data may appear positive, we should consider that, as observed by Harter (1999), the lack of success in domains considered not important by the individual will not impair the overall self-worth and self-esteem of the child. In other words, one becomes concerned with whether repeating children and adolescents actually value scholastic knowledge. This evidence can reflect the lack of the school's importance in the perception of repeating students, suggesting that the role of the school in their lives does not occupy the same space as other domains, such as, for example, social life; because in social relations, they perceive themselves as effectively competent.

For children and adolescents who perceive themselves as little competent, the school and family must promote opportunities for adequate practice and instruction and encouragement (VIEIRA, 1993). Through an adequate planning, which enables children and youngsters to have enriching experiences, optimizing their capacities, the learning experiences of repeating children can be enriched. The school is responsible for reviving the interest of the child in the school context through, among other strategies, approaches that promote motivation and interact the family and student. When motivation strategies are used with the aim of achievement and dominion of an ability, especially for children who show little school performance, a process of self-valuation is reinforced (VALENTINI, 2002a). Still, the value of the child and adolescent must not be reduced if their academic performance does not meet the expectations of adults (GALLAHUE, 2001). With regard to the family,

students without repetition report the existence of a greater family support during their school tasks (PEIXOTO, 2004). Therefore, recovering family support for school activities of repeating students becomes essential in the group investigated. The families of repeating students must be alerted of the lack of importance the school has assumed in the lives of these children and adolescents, and together, school, children and adolescents and their families must look for ways to prevent new failures from occurring.

Another factor to be considered is how much the organization of the educational system is not covering the intrinsic interest of learning (DECI, 1998). Considering the influence of these factors, in future surveys, the school environment in which the repeating students are inserted should be more strongly investigated. That is, which factors are responsible for the levels of competence expressed by repeating students in the cognitive domain. As suggested by Deci (1998), several opportunities can result in different feelings and perceptions in their experience.

5.12 PERCEPTION OF COMPETENCE: RELATIONS IN THE DIFFERENT DOMAINS

In the relations established between scholastic competence and the other domains, for all children from the sample, there were significant correlations. The groups of younger children (8 to 10 & 11 to 12 years) are concerned with how their attitudes agree with the values and standards established in the school environment. It is necessary to understand that for these children, the school environment is a space of new social meanings where, although the family remains important, other significant adults, like the teachers, for example, now have impact on their development. Despite involving children who are already inserted, there is at least three years in school, their social organization has in the teacher the center of reference (GALLAHUE, 2001), thus the valuing of school performance and its repercussion in the social scope are perceived by the child, which seeks to adapt its conduct to the rules established by the school and significant adults.

For the 11-12 years age group, the relations observed between the perceptions of scholastic competence and athletic competence suggests that this group of students value physical activity. Through participation in games, children seek to experience to new ways of improving their abilities. The abilities in games and routine playing of childhood are valued by children who make these a way of increasing social interaction and expanding their group of friends (VALENTINI; TOIGO, 2004). It is important to note that for younger children, the information from parents and teachers serves as reference for behavior and suitability of the

individual's performance (HARTER, 1978), a fact observed in the relations established in this age range.

As the children develop, thus increasing their social interactions, adults lose a significant part of their influence over them, and the group of friends takes on greater importance, such that the students tend to differentiate their perceptions in the school environment (HARTER, 1992). This expectation is confirmed in the absence of significant relations between scholastic competence and the other dimensions of behavior in the 13-14 years age group. These results reinforce the understanding that as children advance through the school grades, their perception of how the school context works and the actions required to deal with it, they tend to differentiate school performance from their private lives and from the relationship with their peers. Unfortunately, these results can also suggest the growing lack of interest of the student in the school, more effectively valuing other domains of behavior, such as, for example, social acceptance by peers, athletic competence in sports activities and physical appearance. According to Vieira (1993), for the adolescent to be accepted in the group, his appearance must comply with the standards of the adolescent society. This also includes behaving in such a way as to appear interesting to peers and friends. Domains in which older children generally perceive themselves as more competent. All this concern suggests a change in the perception of values in relation to the parents and family. In adolescence, one notes the formation of new self-perceptions, possibly marked mainly by the increased importance of peers (VIEIRA, 1993; VIEIRA et al., 1997), a fact evident in this study.

Therefore, the criteria used by the individual to determine how much success or failure in the learning process tends to change with age (ULRICH, 1987); being that younger children show a greater need for feedback from an adult as a source of his or her perception of competence, adapting to the school norms more easily, and as age increases, the importance of the groups of friends increases, becoming the decisive factor of influence (CARROLL; LOUMIDIS, 2001).

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results presented in this survey reinforce the need to understand how children develop their perceptions and judgments of their skills and aptitudes. This understanding, more than a resource presented as a need of the school and teacher to provide an adequate

learning environment for all, from the one with the most ability to the most insecure, with school difficulties, which creates competence and autonomy.

Considering the perceptions of the children investigated and the few opportunities of children from families in socio-economic disadvantages, the school must be configured as a space of greater interaction of its students, promoting extracurricular activities. Children who take part in extracurricular activities tend to have higher levels of competence than children and adolescents who do not take part in extracurricular activities (DALEY, 2002). Furthermore, extracurricular sport can be an effective strategy of the school to positively influence the perceptions of competence and self-concept of its students. Children and youngsters who take part in organized sports programs perceive themselves as more competent due to experiencing feelings of affiliation; perceiving themselves as competent on acquiring new abilities, overcoming new challenges, and on expanding their relationships and social interactions.

One also highlights the importance of the role and responsibility of the Physical Education teacher in understanding the difficulties and needs of children and youngsters during the planning and execution of physical activities, developing challenging and significant activities, routinely using adequate strategies of encouragement and feedback, promoting self-overcoming, avoiding situations of humiliation or excess comparison. The implementation of a context of learning suitable to development must encourage the child or youngster by offering various experiences and opportunities at optimized and gradually more complex levels of challenge, on developing actual and perceived competence in the Physical Education class.

For children and adolescents who experience failures, such as school repetition, joint action strategies by significant people (family members, teachers and peers) involved in the education process of these children should reinforce the importance of the school in their lives, promoting successful and diversified experiences, in which the students can start qualified development of their own skills, be they athletic, cognitive or social.

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