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ATTITUDES TOWARDS SCHOOL, SELF-PERCEIVED SCHOOL COMPETENCE AND GENERAL SELF-ESTEEM DURING AND AFTER THE 1st WAVE OF COVID-19 EPIDEMIC IN SLOVENIA: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The COVID-19 epidemic has had a strong impact on school systems, as most of the world's countries have closed schools and established distance schooling. In a case study on a 4th grade elementary school participant in Slovenia, the author researched the expression and changes in attitudes towards school, self-perceived school competence, and general self-esteem, both during and after distance schooling. With the help of different questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the author concludes that the distance schooling in the participant's elementary school was well organized and that the participant was satisfied with its implementation. The author found more positive attitudes towards school and self-esteem in the post-epidemic period in the participant, while there were no differences in self-perceived school competence between the two periods.

Keywords: case study, COVID-19 epidemic, distance schooling, elementary school, children, development, attitudes towards school, self-perceived school competence, general self-esteem.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (2020) was notified of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause for the first time in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Shortly afterwards, the underlying cause of pneumonia in these cases was identified as coronavirus, later named COVID-19 (Liu et al., 2020). By the end of January 2020, WHO

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(2020) had declared COVID-19 a state of emergency in global public health. Since then, COVID-19 cases have increased rapidly in countries around the world.

Not only does COVID-19 have a significant impact on health care systems, but it is taking a significant toll on individuals and communities as well (Chenneville and Schwartz-Mette, 2020). At the end of 2019 and in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a strong impact on social events in the world, affecting almost all aspects of our lives. Mid-March 2020, the pandemic and its direct and indirect challenges have disrupted our daily life routine and affected the education system. In March and April 2020, more than 190 countries began closing schools, and education began to be implemented remotely, in most cases online. These customized ways of exchanging knowledge have mainly given priority to compulsory school subjects for all primary and secondary school students (Stojanović et al., 2020). According to UNESCO (2020), the closure of schools has affected more than one billion students in the world, changing the process of education. This impacted the school climate, and those changes were reflected in various characteristics and attitudes of students. Both the school climate and individual teachers play a role in students' self-concept and their attitudes towards school. The school climate is defined as students' perceptions of politics, motivation, and attitudes in general, rather than their perceptions of individual members of the education system (Beane and Lipka, 1984).

Numerous researchers in psychology and education (e.g., Harter, 1990; Rosenberg, 1979; Wigfield and Karpathian, 1991) have studied the development of self-concept. They examined both general beliefs such as self-esteem, and the more specific beliefs that children and adolescents have about themselves. Self-esteem is defined as an individual's holistic assessment of oneself or what an individual feels toward themselves (Rosenberg, 1979). In a comprehensive review of major theories in the field of self-esteem, Mruk (1999) showed that the main definitions of self-esteem fall into two categories: those focused primarily on self-esteem (e.g., Coopersmith, 1967; Rogers, 1961), and those based on an individual's assessment of their own competence (James, 1983; White, 1963). After a phenomenological analysis, Mruk (1999) presented a two-dimensional model that interprets self-esteem as an integrated sum of self-evaluation ("I am

a good person entitled to care and respect from others”) and self-competence (“I can cope with the challenges I face in life”).

The general self-esteem represents general characteristics of the individual, is considered to be more stable and is fundamentally dependent on the social support provided to the individual by significant others (Bishop and Inderbitzen, 1995; Harter, 1990; Ryan et al., 1994). It may be especially important to identify factors that shape the emergence of individual differences in self-esteem early in life, i.e., in childhood and adolescence. Individual differences in personality traits, including self-esteem, become more stable and are more difficult to change as children grow up (Donnellan et al., 2012; Kuster and Orth, 2013; Trzesniewski et al., 2003).

Individuals' competence-related beliefs conceptualized either as an assessment of how well an individual performs in a particular activity, expectations of future performance or self-efficacy, have received much research attention (Wigfield et al., 1997). Self-evaluation in individual areas, such as social or school competence, indicates an individual's sense of capability within these areas, and is considered to be more susceptible to contextual and situational influences (Campbell and Lavelle, 1993). Researchers have shown that competence-related beliefs in older children, adolescents, and adults predict performance, amount of effort, achievement goals, and a general sense of self-worth (Bandura, 1994; Covington, 1984; Eccles et al., 1983; Nicholls, 1990; Schunk, 1991; Stipek and Mac Iver, 1989).

Students' health and subjective well-being are of utmost importance all over the world (OECD, 2013). They have immediate consequences in learning abilities and learning outcomes. One of the central variables that can threaten students' well-being and school performance (Walton and Cohen, 2011) is whether the student feels a sense of belonging to a direct social context such as school (Willms, 2000) or feels excluded from it. Thus, a sense of belonging is an important factor of school outcomes, such as self-esteem, subjective well-being, and students' performance. Students with more positive attitudes towards school might feel a stronger sense of belonging to the school and academic context in general compared to students with less positive attitudes (Marksteiner and Kuger, 2016). In addition, it is hypothesized that not only students' attitudes

toward school, but also those of their parents, are related to students' sense of belonging (Ostrove and Long, 2007).

The construct of attitudes toward school refers to an individual's positive or negative inclination towards schooling and each of the activities in the school environment that can be cognitive, emotional, or behavioural (Bernstein et al., 2006). Most children come to school ready and eager to learn. Much attention should be paid to how the school can best maintain, encourage, and strengthen children's attitude towards school and ensure that they leave school motivated and competent to continue learning throughout life. Without the development of appropriate attitudes, children may not be well prepared to acquire new knowledge and skills needed to successfully adapt to changing circumstances (Kuusinen and Leskinen, 1988). For some students, school is central to their daily lives, and they perceive schooling as essential to their long-term well-being. Such an attitude is reflected in their participation in academic and non-academic endeavours: students have good relationships with the school staff and with other students when their attitude towards school is positive. However, many students express negative attitudes towards school as they do not believe that school and academic achievements will have a strong impact on their future. Such negative feelings and attitudes might lead to dissatisfaction with school (Willms, 2000). Students may withdraw from school activities and in some cases engage in disruptive behaviour and show negative attitudes towards teachers and other students.

Based on literature, there is some evidence that attitudes towards school, self-perceived competence and self-esteem may depend on situational factors, one of which is undoubtedly the COVID-19 epidemic and the consequent distance schooling. The data published by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport show that significant differences were observed between individual schools and even individual teachers in how they organized and conducted distance schooling. For this reason, we believe that research focusing on various aspects of the epidemic and distance schooling, and in addition includes various methodological approaches, may yield extremely valuable results.

The objective of the present study was to conduct a case study in which we assessed a Slovenian elementary school student's

attitudes towards school, self-perceived school competence, and general self-esteem, both during and after the COVID-19 epidemic. We were interested in whether the assessed constructs would change in these two periods, and if so, in what way.

Method

Participants

A female fourth-grade elementary school student participated in the study. She was 9 years and 7 months old at the beginning of the study. In both the 2018/2019 school year and the 2019/2020 school year, she received excellent final school grades. The participant lives in the Coastal – Inner Carniola statistical region of Slovenia, where she also attends a subsidiary elementary school with a smaller number of classes and with a smaller number of students in each class. The student's parents are divorced and share custody of their daughter. Consequently, she spends part of her time with her mother (in a town) and part of her time with her father (in a small village near the school). Data on the participant were also obtained from her parents and class teacher.

The participant was invited to the study on an occasional basis, and the conditions for inclusion were: (1) attending elementary school between 4th and 8th grade, (2) schooling in Slovenia, and (3) distance schooling experience during the COVID-19 epidemic and returning to the »traditional« form of schooling after the epidemic was officially cancelled.

Instruments

Data for the study was obtained using various research approaches and instruments:

Data on the declaration and cancellation of the epidemic in Slovenia, and on decisions regarding distance schooling and return to school was obtained from official online sources of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (2020);

Data on the organization of schoolwork during and after the epidemic was obtained from the participant, her parents, class teacher, and the school website;

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the participant, her parents, and the class teacher;

Three translated and adapted questionnaires for assessing the researched constructs were used: (1) School Attitude Questionnaire

(SAQ; Şeker, 2011). The questionnaire consists of 22 Likert-type items (scored from 1 to 5), which form six dimensions: Belongingness to School, School Image, Loneliness at School, Testing and Feedback-Giving Activities, Teaching, and Reluctance. (2) Scholastic Competence Scale of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC; Harter, 2012). The scale measures a child's specific perceived cognitive competence, as applied to schoolwork, and consists of six items set in a "structured alternative format" (Harter, 1982), scored from 1 to 4. (3) Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES-10; Rosenberg, 1965). The scale measures general self-esteem and consists of ten Likert-type items (scored from 0 to 3).

Procedure

Data collection took place from mid-March 2020 to the end of June 2020. Based on set conditions, we selected a participant of the study, who, with the parents' consent, filled out the selected questionnaires. She completed the questionnaires twice: May 8th, 2020 (eight weeks after starting distance schooling), and June 19th, 2020 (three weeks after returning to the traditional form of schooling). Completing the questionnaires took 10 minutes each time. In the last week of the school year, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the participant, her parents, and the class teacher, each lasting about 10 minutes. Throughout the data collection period, we also monitored posts on the websites of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (2020), as well as posts and notices on the participant's school's website.

Results

In this chapter, we present the results obtained in the study via the participant's completion of questionnaires and the interviews, conducted with the participant, her parents, and her class teacher. All interviews covered similar questions but were tailored to the person with whom each interview was conducted. The questions in the first part of the interview referred to which changes interviewees experienced during and after the epidemic and how they perceived distance learning. The second part of the interviews covered the participant's attitudes towards school, her school competence, and self-esteem. All data were coded into seven content sets, which are presented in Table 1 and will be discussed in subsections below.

Table 1: Code Definitions

Code name	Definition
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Official data on the epidemic	Date of the beginning and cancellation of the COVID-19 epidemic in Slovenia, closure and reopening of schools.
Perceived changes during the epidemic	Changes in the daily routine, coordination of commitments, social isolation, setting up schoolwork through computers.
Adjustments and organization of schooling	Choice of learning content, learning content explanation, individual schoolwork, preparation and completion of school assignments, use of computers, knowledge assessment, social distance, use of protective equipment.
Assessment of distance schooling	Ballast elimination, learning habits and responsibilities, adaptation, computer literacy.
Attitudes towards school	Belongingness to school, school image, loneliness at school, testing and feedback-giving activities, teaching, reluctance.
School competence	Self-perceived competence, completion of obligatory and additional tasks, school performance.
Self-esteem	Self-reporting of self-esteem, observations of others.

The code definitions include data obtained from the participant as well as data obtained from her parents, class teacher, and available online sources.

Official data on the COVID-19 epidemic in Slovenia

In this section, we present data obtained from accessible online sources of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (2020).

March 11th, 2020: WHO declares the COVID-19 pandemic.

March 12th, 2020: The Government of the Republic of Slovenia declares the COVID-19 epidemic.

March 16th, 2020: schools close; distance schooling is established.

May 15th, 2020: The Government of the Republic of Slovenia cancels the epidemic.

May 18th, 2020: students from 1st to 3rd grade of elementary school and final year high school students are instructed to return to school. The return to school takes place under special conditions – smaller groups, use of protective equipment, hygiene rules must be observed.

May 25th, 2020: 9th grade elementary school students return to school.

June 1st, 2020: schooling in the first triad and ninth grade of elementary school can be carried out in groups of usual size. Under the same conditions, traditional schooling begins for students of 4th and 5th grade of elementary school.

June 3rd, 2020: 6th, 7th, and 8th grade elementary school students return to school. Students from 1st to 3rd grade of high school are to complete the school year via distance schooling.

Data shows frequent changes that were implemented from mid-March to early June regarding the closure of schools, distance schooling, cancellation of the epidemic and the gradual return of students to schools in Slovenia. The underlined data apply to students in the same age group as our study participant.

Perceived changes during the COVID-19 epidemic in Slovenia

Significant changes during the epidemic are reported by the participant, her parents, and class teacher. The participant reports not going to school as the biggest change, which caused boredom and made days seem longer. Her teacher and parents also report a changed daily routine as they did not spend part of the day at work. Schools were, of course, closed and teachers worked from home, and the possibility of working remotely for individuals with elementary school children was quickly established. In addition to these aspects, both the participant's parents and teacher report they had to coordinate their responsibilities to a large extent. Parents report having to coordinate work at home, help their daughter with distance learning and do household chores. The teacher, on the other hand, reports having to coordinate distance schooling while taking over some classroom work with a lower year class, as these students had to be split into two smaller groups due to safety concerns.

During the epidemic, the participant missed her friends, teachers, and the school in general. Her parents and class teacher also report that they have been affected at the social level, having been isolated from their loved ones. The teacher also mentions that she had some difficulty in setting up work via computer, as this was an area she was not as familiar with prior to the epidemic.

Adjustments and organization of schooling

The participant's elementary school saw changes in the organization of schooling, both during and after the epidemic. During the epidemic, teachers prepared learning materials and assignments, which they passed on to students once a week and the students performed their work independently. The learning content was mostly prepared in the form of worksheets and instructions for workbook exercises and topics. The teachers selected the content carefully and as lightly as possible – they followed the guideline "less is more". Videos were included to help explain new content. After three weeks of distance learning, the participant's teacher also set up an online instant communication channel, where she was available to students if they needed help or just wanted to chat, and a week later they began to process certain learning content using the Zoom videoconferencing system. During the last two weeks of distance learning, teachers also assessed students' knowledge, employing different methods – orally through the Zoom app, through online surveys, and by completing worksheets.

Even after the epidemic was cancelled and students returned to classrooms, schoolwork did not proceed as before; teachers had to wear protective masks, and everyone involved in the schooling process had to pay strict attention to hygiene. Students sat behind separated desks; socializing was not allowed. The participant's school also adopted a no-homework policy, as the school no longer wanted to burden students with additional work at home.

Assessment of distance schooling

Distance schooling, according to the participant, her parents, and the class teacher, had both positive and negative effects. The participant mentions that the teachers put a lot of effort into preparing the assignments. Her teacher points out that the students completed all requirements as defined by the curriculum, focusing mainly on the core aspects of each subject, and there was much more practical work and individual research. Spending more time with family members was reported as an important advantage, as was the fact that during distance schooling students' learning habits and responsibility for independent work could be encouraged.

On the other hand, distance schooling required a lot of adjustment so that all the family members' obligations were completed at the end of the day. Social isolation was also a significant obstacle for everyone, as they greatly missed their loved ones. The participant's parents

point out that in the current information age, computer literacy and computer-based education could be better implemented and that better e-learning tools should be available.

Attitudes towards school

Attitudes towards school were primarily assessed with the SAQ questionnaire. Table 2 shows the results on the individual dimensions as achieved by the participant in both assessments.

Table 2: Scores on the dimensions of the SAQ questionnaire

	Period of completion	
	During distance schooling	After returning to school
Belongingness to School	5.00	5.00
School Image	4.50	4.75
Loneliness at School	1.67	1.00
Testing and Feedback-Giving	4.75	4.75
Activities		
Teaching	4.33	4.67
Reluctance	1.17	1.17

Note. The minimum score for each dimension is 1.00 and the maximum score is 5.00.

The differences between the two assessments have appeared in the School Image, Loneliness at School, and Teaching dimensions. These differences show a more favourable result in the post-epidemic period.

We additionally we obtained some information about the participant's attitudes towards school from her parents and the class teacher, who also perceive that the participant likes school and completes school assignments without problems. However, during the epidemic, both her parents and teacher noticed that her attitude towards school somewhat fluctuated, and that she was increasingly less motivated to complete schoolwork. Her motivation, however, returned in the post-epidemic period.

School competence

To assess the participant's self-perceived school competence, we obtained data using the Scholastic Competence Scale of the SPPC questionnaire (Harter, 2012), and additionally asked the participant's parents and class teacher how they perceive her school competence.

The participant achieved the same result in both assessments with the scale: 3.67 (out of a maximum of 5). Her parents and class teacher also report that the participant did well in school, performed compulsory assignments regularly, but completed slightly fewer of the additional assignments that the teacher sent to more successful students. The participant quickly understood new topics and concepts, and had no problems solving the related tasks. This is clearly illustrated in the answer given to us by the participant's parents:

“During the epidemic, schoolwork was relatively intense, although it seemed that there was not much of it. Namely, because she had no problems with the learning content, everything went faster. She understood the new material and did not need further explanation and help.”

We also monitored the participant's grades during and after distance schooling. The grading process took place in a somewhat limited form, as the Ministry's instructions stipulated that one grade obtained per semester was sufficient to successfully complete subjects. All the grades the participant received during and after the epidemic were excellent.

Self-esteem

The participant's self-esteem was primarily assessed using the RSES-10 scale (Rosenberg, 1965). These results were supplemented with information obtained through interviews with the participant, her parents, and the class teacher. The scale scores show a slight difference between the two assessments (first assessment: 24.00; second assessment: 27.00; minimum = 0.00, maximum = 30.00).

In the interview the participant describes herself as good and kind, which did not change during and after the epidemic. Her parents believe that she displays good self-esteem, but that she needs some encouraging words, support and praise every now and then. They explained their observations further with the following:

“She often asks if she is good, if she is doing well, etc. These questions were more common during the distance schooling period. The lower frequency of these questions before the epidemic might be

explained by the endorsements she had probably received at school.”

However, her teacher says that she did not notice any significant changes in the participant's self-esteem. She describes her as relaxed, playful, sociable, and always in the spotlight. The teacher elaborates:

“She seems to me the same as usual. Before, during, and after the epidemic – a wide smile, sparkling eyes, laughter, and chatter.”

Discussion

In the case study we evaluated attitudes towards school, self-perceived school competence, and general self-esteem, both during and after the COVID-19 epidemic, in a Slovenian elementary school student. Our main research question was whether the assessed constructs changed in these two periods, and if so, in what way. To assess the researched constructs, we presented three questionnaires to the study participant twice: eight weeks after starting distance schooling and three weeks after returning to the traditional form of schooling. Additional data was obtained through interviews with the participant, her parents, and class teacher, and through the websites of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (2020), and participant's elementary school's website. By obtaining participant responses in two different periods, our study acquired elements of a diachronic case study.

The COVID-19 epidemic in Slovenia officially lasted 9 weeks. During this time, there were frequent changes to the organization of education; schools closed, and distance schooling was established. After the epidemic was cancelled, students began to gradually return to schools. Thus, for different age groups of students, distance schooling took place for different lengths of time, between 9 and 15 weeks. Distance schooling brought several social and organizational changes to the daily routines of the study participant, her class teacher, and her parents. On the social side, the participant emphasised missing her classmates as one of the more important changes. The organizational changes during the epidemic were mainly reported by the participant's parents and her class teacher, as they were faced with coordinating various obligations related to work, family, and schooling on a daily basis. Distance schooling in the

participant's elementary school was well organized. The participant is of the opinion that the teacher made a great effort in preparing the materials and that she was always available for questions and help. Nevertheless, the participant missed school during distance learning and was incredibly happy when the school reopened. In the post-epidemic period, schooling took place slightly differently than before the epidemic, but the participant was so pleased that she was able to go to school that no changes or adjustments were an obstacle. Here we can again see that the school environment means much more than just delivery and reception of knowledge, as it acts as a strongly interconnected system within which important everyday interactions between different groups take place, as also Bronfenbrenner (1994) argues in his bioecological theory.

The participant displays quite favourable results in attitudes towards school. An extremely high expression of the Belongingness to School dimension can be seen, where the participant achieved the maximum score both during and after the epidemic. The participant therefore enjoys going to school and feels that she belongs to it. The School Image dimension is also highly expressed and displays a slight increase between distance schooling and post-distance schooling periods – the biggest difference was shown in the item "It is a privilege to study in this school"; the participant evaluates her school more positively when she attends it in the form of traditional schooling. A similar increase in expression is also seen in the dimension Teaching, where the participant assessed the item "Students are provided help in learning activities" more favourably during traditional schooling. In traditional schooling, teachers see easily which students need help with tasks. In distance learning, this kind of awareness may be limited due to the distance between the teacher and students, which was most likely perceived by our participant as well. The results also show a decline in the Loneliness at School dimension score, indicating that the participant felt slightly lonelier during distance schooling. The biggest difference was observed in the item "Teachers are only interested in hardworking students". We believe that in the participant's opinion, due to the considerable reduction of the given tasks during distance learning, those students who completed additional tasks besides the obligatory ones, stood out even more. Special attention needs to be paid to this fact, as otherwise the differences between more and less successful students could quickly deepen. Based on the obtained results, we conclude that the participant has positive attitudes towards school

and schoolwork, evident both during and after the epidemic. Like the findings of Walton and Cohen (2011), we can also conclude that our participant's positive attitudes towards school and her school achievements might be positively related.

A high self-perceived school competence can be observed in the participant, namely her scores were the same both during distance schooling and after returning to school. Based on this, we can conclude that the participant sees herself as exceptionally good at schoolwork and just as bright as her peers. She believes that she does her schoolwork quickly, that she remembers things easily, and that she almost always comes up with the right answers to questions. For the participant, situational factors seemingly did not play as much of a role in how competent she perceives herself for schoolwork. Our findings thus do not agree with the findings of previous research (Campbell and Lavalley, 1993), which reports a significant impact of context and situation on self-perceived competence. With the participant and her parents all reporting on the school's efficient organization during the epidemic, it could be argued that this specific situation simply was not detrimental to the participant's self-perceived competence.

Participant's scores on the self-esteem scale were quite high both during and after the epidemic. We can see that her self-esteem increased slightly in the post-epidemic period, with the most noticeable changes in the items "I am able to do things as well as most other people" (the score was higher after returning to school) and "I certainly feel useless at times" (the score was lower after returning to school). Based on the obtained results, we can conclude that the participant has a positive attitude towards herself, she believes that she has many positive qualities and that she is just as valuable as other people, which is more pronounced when life takes place in an orderly manner and is not affected by extreme situations and similar factors. Most research finds that self-esteem in individuals is a stable construct that rarely changes (Bishop and Inderbitzen, 1995; Harter, 1990; Ryan et al., 1994), but from our results we conclude that the COVID-19 epidemic played a significant role in the participant's assessment of her own self-esteem. We believe that this is related to the fact that self-esteem is still being formed during childhood (Kuster and Orth, 2013), and the results may indicate the possibility that the epidemic and consequent

distance schooling were a rather powerful factor playing an important role in the participant's self-esteem.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that the distance schooling at the participant's school was well organized and that the participant was satisfied with it. We found that the participant has positive attitudes towards school and a positive self-esteem despite slight changes evident between the two time periods. Namely, both constructs were slightly more favourable in the post-epidemic period. In both time periods the participant perceived herself as highly competent in school. We believe that the present case study sheds light on one of the impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic. It would be sensible to broaden the present study by including a larger sample. This would allow us to gain a more comprehensive insight into the impacts of the epidemic on students and organize the schooling process in a way that would mitigate possible adverse effects on their self-esteem and attitudes towards school.

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