Institutionen för pedagogik och specialpedagogik

Academic Self-Concept: Formation, Development, and Long-Term Outcomes

Av

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Abstract

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This thesis investigates academic self-concept, defined as students' perceptions of their academic ability. Academic self-concept is an important construct in educational psychology, both as an outcome of students' academic experiences and as a predictor of later educational and life outcomes. Although previous research has shown that academic self-concept is related to achievement, motivation, educational choices, and attainment, questions remain regarding how it is formed, how it develops during adolescence, and how it is associated with outcomes beyond the educational system.

The overall aim of the thesis was to broaden knowledge about the formation, development, and long-term associations of academic self-concept. The thesis comprises three empirical studies based on Swedish longitudinal data from the Evaluation Through Follow-up study. Study I examined the development of mathematics and English self-concepts from Grade 6 to Grade 12 and extended the internal/external frame-of-reference model using latent growth curve analysis. Study II investigated the big-fish–little-pond effect in mathematics and Swedish and examined whether individual cognitive ability moderated the relationship between school-average achievement and students' subject-specific self-concepts. Study III examined the long-term association between general academic self-concept in Grade 6 and registered income in adulthood, while accounting for achievement, track affiliation, cognitive ability, gender, and parental education.

The findings showed that academic self-concepts were related to multiple comparison processes. In Study I, mathematics and English self-concepts followed different developmental patterns during adolescence, and internal and external comparisons were more clearly related to the development of mathematics self-concept than English self-concept. In Study II, school-average achievement was negatively related to students' subject-specific self-concepts, in line with the big-fish–little-pond effect. The results also provided partial support for the bright-student hypothesis, as cognitive ability moderated the effect in mathematics but not in Swedish. In Study III, general academic self-concept in Grade 6 was positively associated with income in adulthood, even after accounting for academic and background factors.

Taken together, the thesis contributes to research on academic self-concept by showing how students' self-perceptions are related to internal, external, and social comparison processes, how they develop differently across subject domains, and how early academic self-concept is associated with long-term outcomes beyond the educational system.