Project Approach: A Parameter for Forming the Self-concept of Adult Learners — An Inclusion Tool[*]

Greziou Aikaterini, Dakopoulou Athanasia

(Hellenic Open University, Greece)

Abstract: It has been argued that a person's self-concept does not remain constant throughout his life but changes. An important parameter in shaping self-concept in adulthood is the dynamic role of projects in education. In the present research, an attempt is made to investigate whether the self-concept formed by the individual about his relationship with education can change during adulthood and act positively in the direction of inclusion. The qualitative approach was chosen for the implementation of the research and the research tool was Life Narrations. The participants were graduates of the Second Chance School (SCS) of Naoussa and their instructor who took part in two action plans of their school in the period 2018–2019. Research has shown that the second experience in education was very different from the first. The adult learners — as underage students — had felt that they were not able to participate in education, resulting in their withdrawal. On the contrary, during their studies at SCS and through the innovative teaching techniques of the school, the trainees showed high performance in the lessons, felt creative participating in the school activities, socialized and found that they have the skills to continue and be included in the educational process.

Key words: inclusion, self-concept, project approach, adult learners, life narrations

1. Introduction

Self-concept is considered particularly important for the activation of the individual, and the strengthening of self-concept is a milestone for the development of healthy psycho synthesis and active behavior of the individual in the wider social environment. Therefore, self-concept is what determines in human thought, who he is, what abilities he has, which career path he will follow, what goals he can set in his life (Flouris, 1989). In trying to define self-concept, we encounter the image that the individual forms of himself, the subjective way of recognizing himself and perceiving his strengths and weaknesses (Biney, 2015).

In the theory of social interaction, the individual perceives himself and his individual characteristics through his social relations and through the wider social and cultural environment. Cooley and Mead (1902 and 1934 respectively, cited in Epstein, 1973, pp. 2–3) supported that self-concept is a product of a social process and is shaped by interpersonal relationships, by what others think of the individual and his interaction with others

---

belonging to his social environment.

In an approach that combines phenomenological theories and the theory of symbolic interaction, Rosenberg (1979, cited in Gekas, 1982, p. 3) argues that self-concept is "the set of individual thoughts and feelings", formed in first years of the person's life, and remains constant in the following years. On the other hand, Epstein (1973) supports that the individual's self-concept is not consolidated but undergoes changes through social interaction with others.

Markus and Wurf (1987) consider that self-concept consists of a system of cognitive/emotional structures of the self, the "shapes", created by the individual's experiences in specific areas, where the person participates, and these "shapes" are the real tool for processing information about the individual. Arguing that self-concept is not static, they believe that it changes and, each time, it shapes depending on the social situation where the person is.

The primary source of information about the individual and the formation of his self-concept is his environment and mainly the people he comes in daily contact with, the "Significant Others" (Harter, 1988). These people do not remain the same throughout a person's life. In the first years of life, "Significant Others" is the people in the close family environment, later his teachers and peers, while in his adult life everyone around him who plays a significant role in his life (Harter, 1988; Lightfoot, Cole & Cole, 2014).

The nature of self-concept, as well as the various theories, either in favor of the consolidation or in favor of the changes of self-concept over time, divided — from time to time — theorists and researchers. A study by Mortimer et al. (1981, cited in Gekas, 1982) showed a high level of stability of self-concept in adulthood. However, many other scholars agreed that the formation of the individual's self-concept continues over time. Harter (1988) finds that — as the individual develops — constantly he takes on more roles, participates in more environments, develops unique abilities and, consequently, forms different self-concepts — sometimes positive and sometimes negative — in accordance with his criteria and interests. In this way, he can illustrate a different self-concept as a member of his family, as a student in his class or as a member of his friendly company. According to Harter (1988), the self-concept of the individual for some short periods of time can be stable, when, e.g., the person participates for a period of time in a specific environment and his course in this environment does not show changes. However, when the same person moves into a new environment and integrates into it, he can form a different self-concept.

The present research, compiled with the view that self-concept does not remain the same permanently but takes many individual forms, seeks the form that concerns the individual's perception of himself, in the relationship that he forms with the field of education, and if this particular form of self-concept varies over time. The participants of the present research are adults who returned to education — after their long absence — and, in particular, they studied at SCS of Naoussa where they experienced an innovative way of teaching, the one applied by SCS, participating in experiential teaching techniques, i.e., projects of the specific school.

2. Education in Second Chance Schools

The learners in SCS are not minor students of formal education but adults, who come to education voluntarily with goals and expectations. When they withdrew from education, some may have encountered severe learning disabilities, some dropped out of school for family or professional reasons, some because they did not understand the value of education for their professional and social development as well as advancement. Finally, some withdrew from education, internalizing the idea that they were not able to continue — believing that they had failed themselves, when in fact they had failed due to functional weaknesses of the education system — resulting in low self-concept

of their learning abilities and to believe that their withdrawal from education is the "only solution" (Rogers, 1999; Fragoudaki, 1985; Hatzitheocharous, 2010).

However, if adult learners receive support from the school, their self-concept of their academic abilities and motivation to participate in education increases (Silverman & Casazza, 2000, cited in Biney, 2015, p. 35). In this context, SCS were created to offer a second chance and to help people — who have moved away from education in the past — to participate in education again, to complete their compulsory education and to receive the High School Diploma (Vergidou. co., 2018; Zarifis, 2003; Chatzitheocharous, 2010).

The present research goes one step further than the formal part of what the SCS offers. It seeks the new relationship that people — who study at SCS — form with a "space" from which they had moved away in the past, the field of education. Therefore, it remains important to understand whether this new relationship with education is changing and, in particular, whether the trainees' self-image is differentiated, after their re-participation in the educational process. The relationship between positive self-concept and inclusion in education is also considered two-way, since — as Rogers argues, according to Cohen et al. (1988, cited in Biney, 2015, p. 33) — people who want to enhance self-concept try to achieve it through their development in education.

3. Projects in Adult Education

In the direction of enhancing the self-concept of learners, group teaching techniques, such as action plans, work very helpful and prove to be ideal strategies for enhancing the self-concept of adult learners (Biney, 2015). Projects are the most appropriate teaching method for adult education and are often applied in SCSs by their trainers (Alevizopoulos, 2015). The projects promote and evaluate the acquisition of critical ability and the formation of attitudes, such as conciliation and cooperation with other trainees, active participation, taking responsibility and taking initiatives, solving existing problems. With the support of their trainers, the trainees become at the same time researchers and producers of knowledge, taking action either within the school room or in the wider operating community of SCS (Manthou, 2007). Adult learners — who participated in group work — have showed more positive self-concept compared to learners who did not participate in group work (Biney, 2015).

Also, the presentation of the projects encourages the trainees to develop a critical point of view of their work, their effort, their team. They revalue what they acquired on the way to achieve their plan, they notice any omissions or mistakes, they evaluate their own contribution to this goal, but also the value of cooperation and conciliation with the other participants. Finally, the presentation of the action plan to a wider audience offers justification of the efforts and work of the trainees, promotes their social recognition and empowerment, resulting in the development of more self-confidence and social emancipation (Karatzolas et al., 2006; Kontakos & Govaris, 2006).

4. The Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the self-concept of individuals who have been trainees of SCS of Naoussa about the relationship they have formed with education and whether this perception shows changes or not, after attending this school and through their participation in projects that it implements. The qualitative approach was chosen as a methodological approach, in order for the respondents to be able to speak "freely" about the topic, something that could not be done using a quantitative approach (Creswell, 2011; Mason, 2011).

The research was conducted in June 2020. The sample of the research consisted of the trainees of SCS of Naoussa of the school periods 2017–2018 and 2018–2019, who participated in two projects, in the amateur film "A

crazy-crazy family" and in the campaign "ECOMOBILITY Ecological Movement 2018–2019" (Ecomobility, 2019a) in the framework of the program: "Accessibility of Persons with Disabilities in the city of Naoussa" (Ecomobility, 2019b).

For the collection of research data, Life Narrations were selected, so that, through the reflection and reconstruction of what the respondents experienced in the field of education in the past and recently in SCS of Naoussa, to have the space and time to narrate their experience (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2008; Bondilla, 2010). One educator (K1), who undertook most part of planning and implementation of the two activities but she also participated actively in these activities — as an equal member of the group among her trainees — narrated her own Life Narration citing her own experience in her cooperation with the above trainees in the two projects of SCS.

5. Conclusions

5.1 The Way of Teaching That the Respondents Experienced in Education

The trainees come from families of low socio-economic strata, so neither they themselves as minor students of formal education nor their parents knew — in the past — the value of education and its use as a means for social development and improvement of their lives. The weakness in their academic skills and — at the same time — the lack of support from their family environment resulted in the formation of a low "self-horizon" in their ability to participate in education and, eventually, in the lack of personal motivation to participate in education and eventually their resignation from it.

It was found that, in the inability of the participants — as minor students in the past — to participate dynamically and productively in the learning process at school, the corresponding attitude of the school towards them was indifference, stigmatization and marginalization. The result was that respondents, as underage students, internalized feelings of inferiority and defeat in terms of their participation in this space who also did not have adequate support from their family environment were driven to drop out of education, confirming Rogers's view (1999) that people who dropped out of school prematurely, mistakenly they hold themselves responsible for their failure, while in fact they are "victims" of the inadequate educational system.

The respondents stopped their education as minor students and returned to education many years later, specifically after 25–35 years. The withdrawal of respondents from school — either as a reaction or as a resignation — was a natural consequence of their bad experiences and the formation of low self-concept and self-esteem for their participation in it (Harter, 1988; Fragoudaki, 2001).

The indifference, devaluation and marginalization they received at a young age in education, the bitterness of their departure from it is pervasive in the Life Narrations of the respondents. However, their participation in the SCS of Naoussa, in their adult life, gave them an opportunity not only to participate again in education, but also to know a new way of approaching and teaching by SCS teachers and the teaching techniques they applied. Three key factors, the more mature behavior of the trainees, the new way of teaching with the innovative educational techniques and the genuine interest and acceptance of the teachers, led the trainees to meet a new "aspect" of education, more accessible, which was very different from "inhospitable aspect" of the formal education than they had experienced in the past.

5.2 The Self-concept of the Respondents Regarding Their Relationship With Education

Respondents are aware of their own weaknesses and problematic behaviors, elements with which they participated in the field of formal education — as adolescent students — and they admit that they participated

weakly and immaturely in education at a young age. In addition, they know that the school context did not help them to join it, instead it stigmatized or ignored them, and this resulted in them feeling disadvantageous in the spectrum of education as "misfitted" and "undesirable".

Usually the person may not always know what his abilities are, and, not receiving this information directly from himself, he focuses on others around him to gather it. When a person receives indifferent or even negative information about himself from the "Significant Others", it is logical not to form a positive perception of himself or his performance in the area where he wants to join (Biney, 2015). When a child is stigmatized by his teachers, the next thing is that his classmates will internalize and adopt the specific stereotype and will treat the child in the same way as the one stigmatized by the teachers. The words of two respondents are typical:

"… We had known that we were not able to understand the lessons and we had resigned, resigned…"

"… When you are rejected as a child, you believe that it is your fault, you believe that the problem is yours and only you should find the solution to this problem."

The participants in the research, for 25 or even 35 years, abstained from education, without having ambitions and motivations to participate in it. The Second Chance School appeared at some point in their course of life, they thought it would not be a difficult school; they were encouraged by other people and finally participated in it.

Professor K1 remembers how the respondents were, what their behavior and feelings were when they first went to SCS and how they gradually changed in the course of their education.

"At first, almost all of them were not at all sure if they would manage to get the diploma. As time went on, I saw them day by day hoping and setting bigger goals. And, finally, after two years, they made me absolutely proud, when — the day after their graduation — we went together to enroll — almost the whole group — in the evening school".

Regarding the recent experience of the respondents from their participation in education and specifically in SCS of Naoussa, they met a hospitable school that welcomed them warmly, "embraced" them and mainly banished their fears of participation in education.

Most of the respondents, referring to their participation in SCS of Naoussa, feel proud of their good performance, feel happy that they can participate in activities and help in the school work, show a dynamic character participating in the learning process and discover new skills and elements themselves, hidden elements that — due to their previous negative experience in education — they did not know they had, as they did not have the opportunity to actively participate in the learning process to reveal them.

The decision for them to participate in the evening high school or in any other context of education, decision taken immediately after obtaining their diploma from the SCS, was now a one-way street for them, since their relationship with education was positively differentiated and the new perception that they formed for themselves in their relationship with education was completely encouraging.

"…We saw that we have different possibilities from the High School, that we are not 'those who cannot'. We can easily do it in education, we can also watch, and write, and read, and do everything!"

5.3 The Contribution of Projects in Shaping the Respondents' Self-Concept in Their Relationship With Education

The projects required the participation of all, their cooperation and their contribution to their realization. Each one offered — through his own knowledge and ability — his own work, his knowledge or even his talent. The

acceptance of each other, the development of the cooperative spirit and the socialization of each were the immediate benefits that all the respondents gained from the specific actions.

But also on a personal level the profits for everyone were multiple. According to their narratives, thanks to these actions, the multiple roles and tasks they undertook, the participants were led to activism, ingenuity, development of organizational and collaborative spirit, but also to strengthening the feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem as well as to empowerment and will for personal development. People who wanted to express their presence, to externalize emotions and to show personal talents managed to do so. On the other hand, shy people or people who avoided claiming their own role in education showed bold and dynamic participation.

Professor K1, referring to the presentation of the action of "Ecomobility" in front of the public, remembers the collaboration of the trainees E3, E6 and E7, who always offered during their schooling, to present the activities of the group. From their Life Narrations, it is obvious that these are three different people who had faced their own problems in the field of formal education in the past and had each experienced their own "exclusion" from this particular field. At the beginning of her Life Narration, K1 had mentioned the following characteristic comment:

> "It is a wonderful feeling to see people who have given up on life, to take it back in their hands and to finally believe — even in their 40s — that they can change and claim a better future."

Confirming, with these words, that these specific actions work "therapeutically" for the participants, and specifically in the relationship that these individuals form with the context of education, providing incentives for inclusion, active participation and progress in this "field" (Manning, 2007). After all, the decision of five out of seven to attend the evening high school, as well as the continuation of the sixth in the field of non-formal education, shows the claim for the right to personal development, but also the claim of a better future and therefore the inclusion in the general context of education.

A number of other issues have emerged in this research, which of course cannot be covered by the present work, but could be the subject of future research. Respondents, despite the various reasons that led them to drop out of school, all showed a weakness in mathematics, at least in their participation in formal education in the past. Consequently, the way mathematics is taught in formal education and the possible lack of connection between mathematics and the real world, which does not help to make mathematics a more accessible and comprehensible subject, should be considered as possible reasons for withdrawing children from formal education.

However, the most important finding of the present research is not simply the implementation of projects in adult learning to enhance learners' self-concept in their relation to education, but the important presence of the charismatic trainer, the trainer who offers motivation to participate, who inspires and participates in learning as "equal" with its learners, as a factor of positive shaping of self-concept of learners and ultimately as a key factor of inclusion of them in education and society.

References

Alevizopoulos G. (2015). "The social dimension of collaborative teaching in the second chance school: Psychosocial benefits and difficulties", *Scientific Educational Magazine "Educational@ Cycle"*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 51–68. (in Greek)

Vergidou A., Vergidis D. and Yfanti A. (2018). "Second chance schools: Educational innovations and school culture — Reproduction or adjustment?", *Educational Sciences*, Vol. 2, pp. 169–186. (in Greek)

Biney I. K. (2015). "Exploring self-concept among adult learners: The case of students pursuing adult education and human resource studies at SCDE, University of Ghana", *International Journal of Educational Policy Research and Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 32–40.

Cohen L., Manion L. and Morrison K. (2008). *Educational Research Methodology*, translated by S. Kyranakis, M. Mavraki, C. Mitsopoulou, P. Bithara, M. Filopoulou, Athens: Metaichmio. (in Greek)

Creswell J. W. (2011). *Research in Education, Planning, Conducting and Evaluation of Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, Ch. Tsorbatzoudis, M. Kouvarakou (Eds.), Athens: Ellin Publications.

Ecomobility (2019a). "The ECOMOBILITY campaign 2018–2019", accessed on 26.04.2020, available online at: https://www.ecomobility.gr/i-ekstrateia/. (in Greek)

Ecomobility (2019b). "Awarding of prizes for the ecological & unhindered movement (17.05.2019)", accessed on 26.04.2020, available online at: https://www.alfavita.gr/ekpaideysi/287127_1o-brabeio-ecomobility-freemobility-2019-sto-sholeio-deyteris-eykairias-naoysas. (in Greek)

Epstein S. (1973). "The self-concept revisited or a theory of a theory", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 28, pp. 404–414.

Zarifis G. (2003). "The connection of the second chance school with the basic principles of continuing education and lifelong learning", *New Education*, Vol. 107, pp. 65–84. (in Greek)

Gekas V. (1982). "The self-concept", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 8, pp. 1–33.

Harter S. (1988). "Developmental processes in the construction of the self. Psychology", in: T. D. Yawkey & J. E. Johnson (Eds.), *Integrative Processes and Socialization: Early to Middle Child-Hood*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., pp. 45–78.

Karatzolas N., Lazaridis N., Mavridis G., Bonanos M. and Moresopoulos M. (2006). *Experiential Group and Personal Development Activities*, Thessaloniki: Miden 010 Deka. (in Greek)

Kontakos A. and Govaris Ch. (2006). "Adult Education: 3. Didactics in adult education", Athens: Institute for Continuing Adult Education, accessed on 13.02.2020, available online at: https://www.openbook.gr/didaktiki-stin-ekpaideysi-enilikwn/. (in Greek)

Lightfoot C., Cole M. and Cole S. R. (2014). *The Development of Children*, Scientific Supervision: Z. Bablekou, edited by M. Koulentianou, Athens: Gutenberg. (in Greek)

Manthou Ch. (2007). "Second chance school: An educational challenge", in: *2nd Educational Conference "Language, Thought and Practice in Education"*, 19-21 October 2007, Ioannina, accessed on 13.02.2020, available online at: http://ipeir.pde.sch.gr/educonf/2/03SihronoSho- lioPP/manthou/manthou.pdf. (in Greek)

Manning A. M. (2007). "Self-concept and self-esteem in adolescents", *Student Services*, February 2007, pp. 11–15.

Markus H. and Wurf E. (1987). "The dynamic self-concept: A social psychological perspective", *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 38, pp. 299–337.

Mason J. (2011). *Qualitative Researching*, Scientific Supervision: N. Kyriazi, edited by E. Dimitriadou, Athens: Pedio. (in Greek)

Bondila M. (2010). "Modern methodological approaches to educational research: Evidence of life", *Pedagogical Review*, Vol. 49, pp. 23–36. (in Greek)

Rogers A. (1999). *Adult Education*, M. Papadopoulou & M. Tombrou, Athens: Metaichmio. (in Greek)

Flouris G. (1989). *Self-concept, School Performance and Parental Influence*, Athens: Grigoris. (in Greek)

Fragoudaki A. (1985). *Educational Sociology: Theories of Social Inequality in School*, Athens: Papazisi. (in Greek)

Fragoudaki A. (2001). "Social inequality in education", in: Dragona Th., Skourtou E., & Fragoudaki A., *Education: Cultural Differences and Social Inequalities*, Vol. A, Patras: E.A.P. (in Greek)

Hadjitheocharous P. (2010). *Training of Second Chance Educational Schools*, Athens: IDEKE. (in Greek)