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**Study regarding the possibilities of increasing the
self-esteem in 15-year-old pupils**

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Abstract

Psychologists consider self-esteem as being a human value that can be higher or lower, depending on the life experiences. According to Nathaniel Branden, self-esteem is *'the ability to confront life's fundamental difficulties without losing hope'*. Starting from this definition, it was thought that a study regarding the evaluation of self-esteem in 15-year-old pupils from various environments and social conditions could help spotting those activities based on which the youths can shape and consolidate their self-esteem. The hypothesis that started this study was the following: *a hierarchy of the self-esteem components for 15-year-olds could help in increasing their feelings of trust in themselves, by organising and developing certain activities in accordance with their needs*. The research was conducted in 2017–2018, on a group of 270 pupils. The study confirmed the hypothesis that the self-esteem level differs according to the pupils' environment and social conditions as well as to their gender.

Keywords: Youths, belonging, competence.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a controversial issue for parents and educators alike. Besides the many physical modifications happening in the young people's bodies, there are also the psychological ones. The 15-year-olds go through the so-called age of emancipation, during which they begin to ask questions regarding their social integration, possible marginalisation or possible unsatisfactions. In other words, this is the time when the young person's get further apart from but also closer to adults, trying to form their own conception on life and the world, by developing their consciousness. The youths' social implication leads to an increase in their self-control and self-regulation. The search for the real self, physical or cognitive, makes them feel the need to belong to a group, which often means trends or leisure activities (Golu & Stomff, 2014).

Erikson (2006) writes that adolescence has two extremes: a clear identity or confusing situations. It is important for the young persons to know their past and based on it, to design their future. The ones who made positive decisions in the past (confidence, initiative) have the biggest chances to recognise their identity (Erikson, 2006). Studies have confirmed that teenagers become more optimistic and more confident if they come from families that talk positively about life. Another important role is played by the parents, when they put themselves in the young persons' shoes, thus releasing a pressure that is on them (Dinca, 2004). 'The ideal parenting model is characterised by a high level of organisation and cohesion, balance, adaptation and integration, optimal relational framework, affection, support, collaboration, cooperation, etc.' (Mitrofan & Ciuperca, 2009). The adolescents' own future experiences help them form and consolidate their self-esteem.

Research by Baumrind (1991) shows that high self-esteem lowers the risk of a failure-oriented behaviour. What influences self-esteem is academic success or failure. Baumeister, De Wall, Ciarocco and Twenge (2005) believe that adolescents with low self-esteem are inclined to cut school because they think they are not good enough. In this case, a determining role would be played by the parents with a tough and cold parenting style. Studies conducted by Elias and Tobias (2003) state that: *children are predisposed to start their life believing that they are not good enough, and as a consequence, people will not love them*, which can result in a drastic decrease in their self-esteem. The same thing can happen to teenagers with a high self-esteem, who think they are too good for school (Baumeister et al., 2005).

Other studies conducted by Feschbach (2011) show that an overprotective parental behaviour leads to an unrealistic self-image, causing hesitant reactions in certain decisional moments. A warm family atmosphere, good colleague relations and positive experiences are the factors leading to the development of self-esteem, observes Stomff (2014).

2. Research objectives

The main objective of this research was to increase the self-esteem level in 15 year-old students through an *Exathlon-type* physical exercise programme over the course of a semester.

3. Hypothesis

The hypothesis that started this study was the following: *a hierarchy of the self-esteem components for 15-year-olds could help in increasing their feelings of trust in themselves, by organising and developing certain activities in accordance with their needs.*

4. Research subjects

The research was conducted on a group of 270 subjects (141 girls and 129 boys), ninth graders from the N. V. Karpen High School of Bacau, who have agreed to participate in this study. The average age of the subjects was of 15.6.

5. Research methods

This study has used the following research methods: the inquiry, the questionnaire, the experimental method, the conversation and the statistical-mathematical method (the SPSS software) to record and analyse the data.

6. Procedure

The research was conducted over 5 months, between September 2017 and January 2018. To assess the subjects' self-esteem, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was applied twice: at the beginning of the experiment and at the end. The results recorded for items 2 and 3 of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale have led the authors to the idea to find means through which the subjects would have more self-confidence and be aware of their own value and their physical and mental potential. The authors believed that an *EXATHLON-type* competition could improve these aspects. In the time between the two assessments, the students have participated in an aforementioned competition, in which the tracks were modified once every 2 weeks. The competition took place on Saturdays, outside school hours. For competition, the authors selected 24 teams each with 10 athletes, with 30 students being substitutes, by rotation. The teams competing against each other were drawn in the day of the competition. The competition was single elimination, so that after each stage, there were team rankings (based on the number of points) and individual rankings (based on the time a subject took to complete the drill). There were ten such competitions in total. The drills contained elements that demanded combinations of speed, strength, endurance and coordination/dexterity from the subjects. A drill was completed in 1.40 minutes, on average. At the same time, the subjects' mental skills were demanded, such as attention, willpower, motivation and affectivity. Another important aspect of these drills was that they encouraged the teenagers to relate more to each other, to want their team to win and to fight more for it. More than that, during the week, they would gather and train for the next stage of the competition.

The *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*, the variant given by Cristophe Andre and Francois le lord, contained the following items:

1. Aim: to research the self-esteem level.
2. Age: 15.
3. Instruction: The questionnaire offers an image about your self-esteem level. Read carefully each sentence and choose an answer as quickly as possible, marking with an 'X' the option that is closest to your current view.

Table 1 presents the items and answer points of the questionnaire. The values that can be obtained in this questionnaire are between 10 (the lowest self-esteem value) and 40 (the highest). After applying the questionnaire, the sum of all points was calculated with the following interpretation: A score between 10 and 16 points tends to indicate a low self-esteem level; between 17 and 33, a medium one; and between 34 and 40, a high self-esteem level.

Table 1. Items and answer points—the Rosenberg self-esteem scale

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	4	3	2	1
At times I think I am no good at all	1	2	3	4
I feel that I have a number of good qualities	4	3	2	1
I am able to do things as well as most other people	4	3	2	1
I feel I do not have much to be proud of	1	2	3	4
I certainly feel useless at times	1	2	3	4
I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others	4	3	2	1
I wish I could have more respect for myself	1	2	3	4
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure	1	2	3	4
I take a positive attitude towards myself	4	3	2	1

7. Results and Discussions

Table 2 presents the average self-esteem values recorded by the subjects during the initial and final tests. One can observe that if initially the average was 1.70, meaning the experimental group subjects had a low self-esteem level, at the end, the average was 2.49, meaning that the self-esteem level was increased to medium and high.

Value 1 was considered to represent low self-esteem, with scores between 10 and 16; value 2, medium self-esteem, with scores between 17 and 33; and value 3, high self-esteem, with scores between 34 and 40.

Table 2. Average self-esteem values recorded by the subjects during the initial and final tests

		Paired samples statistics			
		Mean	N	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Pair 1	Initial_self-esteem	1.70	270	0.457	0.028
	Final_self-esteem	2.49	270	0.608	0.037

The two data sets on the initial and final self-esteem level are strongly, positive correlated, the correlation index being 0.727 for $p < 0.001$, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation index for the self-esteem level

		<i>N</i>	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Initial_self-esteem & Final_self-esteem	270	0.727	0.000

The Student's *T*-test has confirmed that the difference between the initial and final average value of self-esteem is statistically representative, of 0.789 ($t = -31.023$ for 269 degrees of freedom and $p < 0.001$).

In regard to the progress recorded by the subjects in increasing their self-esteem, the average is 0.79, being closer to 1, which was considered to be positive progress (0—no progress and 1—progress).

The data show that out of 270 subjects, 212 participants (78.5%) have made progress in regard to their self-esteem, and 58 participants (21.5%) did not record any progress.

In regard to gender, out of the 114 girls, 37 (26.2%) have recorded a low self-esteem level and 104 (73.8%) have recorded a medium self-esteem level. At the end, the values were as follows: 5% of the female subjects have remained with a low self-esteem level, 34.8% have recorded a medium level, and 60.3% (85 subjects), a high level. Overall, out of the total number of girls, 80.90% have recorded progress in increasing their self-esteem, and only 19.1% did not.

In boys, the situation was relatively similar; initially 43 subjects (33.3%) had low self-esteem and 86 (66.7%) had medium self-esteem. As in the girls' case, there was no one with high self-esteem initially. At the end, the values were as follows: 7% of them have remained with low self-esteem, 43.3% recorded a medium self-esteem and 49.6% a high self-esteem. Out of the 129 boys, 98 (76%) have progressed to another self-esteem level than their initial one, 31 (24%) recording any progress.

The progress of the girls' and boys' self-esteem is presented in Figures 1 and 2.

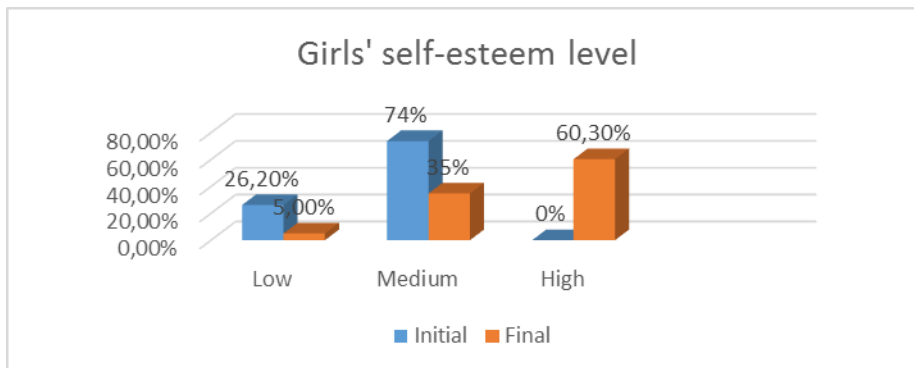


Figure 1. Progress of the girls' self-esteem

It must be said that from 0% recorded initially, 63.30% of the subjects have arrived at a high self-esteem level.

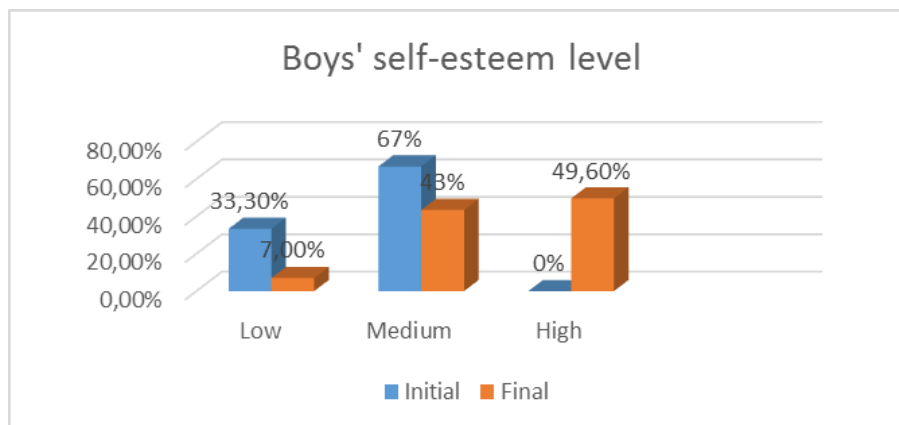


Figure 2. Progress of the boys' self-esteem

In boys also, after the ten stages of the competition, the self-esteem has reached a high level for almost half of them (49.6%).

8. Conclusion

This study has confirmed primarily that an *Exathlon*-type activity can lead to an increase in the self-esteem level. The authors believe that this was possible due to the formative-educational qualities of this type of competition, referring particularly to the fact that the teenagers felt, over the course of the 10 stages, that they belonged to a community, that they had a goal and an ideal for which they had to fight, they felt surrounded by friends who encouraged them in case of failure. The relationship between them has recorded visible progress, especially considering that the ninth graders from this high school had different social backgrounds (rural or urban), most of them not knowing each other before the academic year started. The desire to become better from one stage to another has also proven to be beneficial in the case of self-esteem. The authors also think that this competition has increased their self-esteem if one tracks the answers to the items *At times I think I am no good at all* (at which initially 65% of the subjects have chosen *Agree*, and for which they received two points), and *I feel that I have a number of good qualities* (at which they had chosen *Disagree*, for which they also received two points).

At the end, the subjects recorded three and four points to these items. This aspect confirms that the applied programme has contributed to the subjects becoming aware of certain qualities they never thought they had. However, it cannot be overlooked the fact that the girls had a higher self-esteem level than the boys, both initially and finally. Also, from individual discussions with the students who did not record any progress regarding their self-esteem, the authors gathered that their parents have left to work in other countries, have separated, or at least one of their parents is deceased. Finally, it can be concluded that the study has validated the working hypothesis.

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