

School Self-Concept of Children in the System of Lower Secondary Education in Slovakia - Comparison of Slovak and Roma Children

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Abstract – In the paper we compare a school self-concept in Slovak and Roma children in the system of lower secondary education. As a method of diagnostics we used the Student's Perception of Ability Scale (SPAS, in Slovak *Dotazník sebapoňatia školskej úspešnosti detí*) by Matějček, Vágnerová (1992), who are the authors of the original Czech and Slovak standardisation. We used the innovated form of the scale (Čerešník, 2013). The results of the statistical analysis show significant differences between the compared groups in the monitored indicators of the school self-concept. If we accept that the majority of Roma children come from socially disadvantaged environment then these children belong to children with special educational needs (according to the Act No. 245/2008). Thus, the worse school self-concept in Roma children is not a surprising result. This finding is valid, especially in the relation to possible subdeprivation or deprivation experience based on the deficiency of stimuli leading to saturation of physiological, social and psychological needs.

Keywords – School Self-Concept, Roma Child, Social and Cultural Difference.

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1. Introduction

According to R.J. Shavelson, J.J. Hubner and G.C. Stanton [1], a self-concept is a perception of self. According to R.F. Baumeister [2], we can characterise it as a set of personal beliefs about who or what is I. Also, a self-concept can be perceived as a mental representation of self (e.g. Van der Werff [3]), or as a set of ideas, thoughts and judgements about self (e.g. Macek [4]).

A self-concept originates and develops in social interactions with people that we perceive as important (but also in interactions with authorities), and such social experience is subjectively interpreted in a sense of strengthening or weakening of an existing self-concept. It is linked to specific social contexts, for example school environment. In this environment, a school self-concept develops and it is in a significant relationship with a general self-concept. Its development begins shortly after starting school education, in the period of younger school age.

The attitudes of the significant others towards education, school as an institution, fulfilment of children's obligations and generally to their new social role have a significant influence on how children master this developmental role. Education, or rather academic performance, is highly regarded in our, Slovak, culture. Most parents accept a requirement of good school results as a general norm whose acceptance is a manifestation of a certain social conformity. Parents strive for their children to learn because thus they meet the social expectations. From the point of view of an attitude towards school and an extent of emphasis on school results, however, individual families may vary. Some parents declare the need of education; however, in reality, they do not provide their children with adequate conditions and stimuli to acquire education. If education has no meaning for family's life, a family cannot influence children's motivation to learn much.

It is not only a certain verbal declaration of the importance of achieving a certain level of education, but the values and norms a family lives by. The research studies (e.g. [5], [6]) confirm that parents from a lower social class mostly do not deny the need for education, but it is of no importance in their real lives. They have other values that are more important for them. Usually these are values that neither depend on education nor strengthen the motivation to learn. They include particularly an emphasis on earnings and material values providing for survival or fun which is an escape from the reality. Particularly for people living in socially disadvantaged settings, an achieved education is generally an abstract notion because the benefit from an achieved education can appear only several years later.

In the Slovak society, there are the majority, Slovak, population and several national minorities. The Roma minority is the only minority which does not have a European origin, but whose ancestors have been coming to the territory of Europe from India in several waves of migration since the 10th century. Roma came from India to Europe as a distinctly different cultural group (different socialization norms, clothing, language, music, temperament, religion, traditions, and customs). Such ethnic diversity caused them many problems and in the European countries they were not accepted, they were persecuted, and after the prohibition of nomadic way of life they were forcibly settled at the edges of municipalities or out of the municipalities with majority populations.

Roma have lived on the territory of Slovakia for several centuries (first mentioned in 1322); in some historical periods they were forcibly assimilated, could not develop their culture, promote their values and norms, and influence the majority society reciprocally. In those conditions they were able to maintain the elements of their own ethnic identity; on the other hand, social exclusion influenced a formation of concentrated settlements, intergenerational reproduction of poverty and related poor living conditions, and production of socially pathological behaviours. The developed life strategies in people living in these communities intensified their exclusion and rejection by the majority society. A minority status with all the rights was granted to the Roma minority in Slovakia only in 1991, but vitality of this minority, as described by Giles and Johnson [7], has remained very low.

Roma are a minority which, in comparison with the majority, has more social and cultural differences, which is valid particularly for Roma living in segregated communities. If we looked at the Roma culture through the optics of the Hofstede's cultural dimensions [8], then it is significantly

collectivistic, which corresponds also with the theory about the origin of Roma. Collectivism is characterised by subordination of one's personal goals to a member group, i.e. self-definition by a group, regulation of behaviour by group norms, perceptions of a group as homogeneous, and strong differentiation between own and other groups. For a person it means the necessity of obedience and fulfilment of one's obligations, self-sacrifice for a group, a focus on social issues and those encouraging behaviours related to hierarchy and interdependence. The majority culture, on the other hand, is more influenced by a dimension of individualism that is characteristic by an emotional distance from a group, an emphasis on personal goals, regulation of behaviour through analysis of attitudes, gains and losses, confrontation, preference of the horizontal relationships (friendship, partner) in comparison with the vertical (parent – child). For a person it means to rely on oneself and independence, social skills, but also loneliness.

The Roma says: "Unwell is the one who is poor, even more unwell is the one who is alone", "Odadženo mardo, so ačhil'a a čoro, oda mek goreder, so hino korkoro". Collectivism requires submission to the group, orientation on the goals of the group, and denial of one's own individual ambitions; the individual's attitudes and opinions must be approved by the group. Only then, a person becomes an adequate part of community and family. The majority, however, requires independent decision making, setting individual goals, and personal success. The differences between the majority population and the Roma minority result from the influence of various cultural dimensions which determine the contents of socialization within the society.

Furthermore, we have to point out here that the characteristics of the "culture of poverty" have become rooted in the characteristics of social and cultural discourse in people living in the environment of the marginalized Roma communities. These characteristics do not have any ethnic correlation, and the research studies identified them in poor communities (societies, social classes) all over the world. Lewis [9] states that in specifically limited living conditions of poverty, through collective interaction and in segregation from the environment of the nonpoor population, the values, specific norms and patterns of behaviour, attitudes, and lifestyles are created. Gradually, they are institutionalized and create a specific culture. A child born in such social environment is socialised in intentions of adaptation to disadvantaged living conditions and coping with the marginal situation.

This process is labelled as a generational reproduction of poverty. In Roma living in the

segregated Roma communities, the generational reproduction of cultural legacy and life strategies is significantly strengthened by a different ethnicity, and obvious perceptions of own and foreign groups within the Slovak society. Based on the sociological studies (e.g. [10], [11]), we state that Roma are poorer than any other group of population and their situation is harder than others' from the point of view of multiple social indicators including education, health status, living conditions, an access to labour market opportunities, and within a civil society.

In our study, we assume that cultural and social differences of Roma children are reflected also in their school self-concept. Based on our field surveys conducted in schools attended by Roma children from socially disadvantaged environment (e.g. [12], [13]), we state the characteristics of a "difference" of Roma children in older school age at school. Roma children are not used to solve tasks individually and to decide individually (that's why many of them cheat or conform to the majority of children in the class), which causes problems in individual work, the tasks developing creativity, and all the activities requiring an individual input. The missing development of individual performance and the responsibility for one's actions, behaviour and oneself relates to a collectivistic dimension of a culture in whose intentions the decisions are accepted collectively by the community (family) and are binding for each member. Such missing development (and often rejection) of one's individual ambitions highly determines the success of the children's school career and their further profession orientation, of course negatively. In this scope, the influence by school is contradictory to the influence by family because school requires individual profiling from children while the Roma family does not ask the children: "Who do you want to be?", but it defines their roles in the family and the community (the girls' role is usually completely clear and unalterable). For the children, it is a highly stressful situation which they cannot deal with on their own. There are more differences related to other contents of socialization in socially disadvantaged environment, e.g. the intelligence of the Roma children is developed practically and not theoretically as it is expected in education in our traditional schools; life experiences are in the relationship with everyday reality; there is a lack of experiences necessary for development of a successful school career; the community often perceives school as a repressive institution, it becomes a problem at school; and the theoretical content of education significantly differs from life needs of Roma living at the edge of the society.

Also, Roma children have more complicated interactions and social situations in the school class

as, because of ethnic prejudices, they are often excluded from the interactions with majority children; in the mixed classes, they are children rather unpopular and without any influence, often they are accepted by problematic classmates and then adapt to them.

2. Method

Based on the cited findings about the different educational standards of Roma children in Slovak school, we assume that Slovak children have a higher school self-concept than the Roma children. For its diagnosis we used the Student's Perception of Ability Scale SPAS (Matějček, Vágnerová [14]) – a revised Slovak version (Čerešník [15]). The questionnaire is standardized. We have registered the attempts at its restandardization [16]. The method contains 48 items divided into six subscales: general abilities, mathematics, reading, spelling, writing, and self-confidence.

The sample consisted of 211 children of the lower secondary education (aged 10 to 15) from the Nitra Region and the Košice Region. Both Slovak and Roma children are educated in the classes. According to the data in the Atlas of Roma Communities [17], out of the total estimated number of Roma in Slovakia, most Roma live scattered among the majority population (46.5 %), and 11.5 % of Roma live in the concentrated Roma settlements within municipalities. There are 23.6 % of Roma living in the residential communities that are placed entirely at the edges of municipalities. The number of inhabitants in the segregated settlements was 73920, i.e. 18.4 % of all estimated Roma. Roma children come mostly from the segregated, concentrated or residential communities, i.e. all of them live in socially disadvantaged environments. There were 125 children of the Slovak nationality and 86 children of the Roma nationality.

3. Results

The obtained data were analysed in the SPSS 20.0 programme. We used the independent two-sample t-test and Cohen's d. The standard level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) was used. To convert raw scores to sten scores we used the original norms of the questionnaire (Matějček, Vágnerová [14]) and also new suggested norms (Čerešník [16]). The results are shown in the Table 1 and the Graphs 1 to 4.

In the comparison of the Slovak and the Roma children we found significant differences in the total scores of school self-concept and the questionnaire subscales (Table 1), in the Slovak children's favour (t-values ranging from -3.462 to -4.320). The exceptions were the subscales Reading and Writing.

The Cohen's *d* values showing the effect size were also satisfactory (-0.491 to -0.617). The comparison results are visualised also in the Graphs 1 and 2 that result from the average raw scores.

To convert raw scores to sten scores we averaged the sten values for specific age groups and genders. There were relatively many groups – ten for each subscale and the total scores. The differences between them, however, were not big. That's why we used this form of presentation, i.e. sten estimates. We worked with the original norms (Matějček, Vágnerová [14]; Graph 3) as well as with the new suggested norms (Čerešník [16]; Graph 4). In their comparison, we see certain differences of profiles that are in the only common index of Slovak and Roma children – Writing, and a bigger difference between Slovak and Roma children in Self-confidence, and the total questionnaire scores (the norms by Čerešník, 2015).

Table 2 shows the relationships between the grades in the profiling subjects (Slovak language, Maths) and a school self-concept (the total scores and the scores in the subscales). This relationship is significant in the Slovak children even though the correlation value is lower than 0.3 in some cases. In the Roma children, we identified only the relationship between a school self-concept and a grade in Maths, particularly related to Self-confidence and the total score.

4. Discussion

As M. Čerešník [16] states, children with positive beliefs in their abilities and self-confidence know they can expect good performance from themselves, and therefore, their task-oriented motivation is high. On the contrary, children with negative beliefs about their abilities and low self-confidence expect their own failure, and therefore, their investment of time and energy in a given task is low.

In the comparison of school self-concepts in Slovak and Roma children from socially disadvantaged environment, we confirm the differences in a general school self-concept. It means that Roma children in school experience a failure related to school performance more often, which influences their self-concept. Such a failure rate has several identifiable causes. In school age in the lower secondary education, the key cause is motivation for school work, education. It has several levels: individual, social (family), and interpersonal related to the relationships of Roma children to a school class, their acceptance by their classmates, their status in the class.

Children's individual motivation is influenced particularly by the fact of experiencing success. Considering fact that school requirements differ by their academicity from the needs of persons living in social exclusion and that children do not have "academic" support in their families, they are preordained to experience a school failure. If school results are not important for the family, they are not important for the children neither. Thus, school becomes an unnecessary obligation that is respected, but only formally. Nobody appreciates their good school results, nor reacts to bad ones. If we take an influence of a reward and punishment for school performance into account, in case of no interest in school results by the family, this form of motivation is irrelevant. Their efforts are not appreciated, thus, it is logical that children finally stop learning. Such a feeling has a deeper basis and according to M. Vágnerová [18], it is grounded on the family value systems. According to S. Štech [19], a risk for a school failure can be also socially coded. Children from a certain social class or group are not standardly motivated for school work in their settings and its meaning was not proved there either. It is assumed that children from such an environment will not be successful at school, and such anticipation will influence their motivation and behaviour.

Table 1. Comparison of school self-concept in Slovak and Roma children

	Nationality	N	M	SD	SEM	t	p	Cohen's d
General abilities	Roma	86	2.59	1.801	0.194	-4.320	0.000	-0.617
	Slovak	122	3.82	2.170	0.197			
Mathematics	Roma	86	3.62	2.030	0.219	-4.276	0.000	-0.601
	Slovak	123	4.86	2.101	0.189			
Reading	Roma	86	4.45	2.304	0.248	-1.746	0.082	-0.245
	Slovak	125	5.02	2.350	0.210			
Spelling	Roma	85	3.41	2.456	0.266	-3.462	0.001	-0.491
	Slovak	125	4.67	2.675	0.239			
Writing	Roma	85	4.99	2.228	0.242	-.618	0.537	-0.088
	Slovak	123	5.19	2.313	0.209			

Self-confidence	Roma	86	3.83	1.874	0.202	-2.325	0.021	-0.331
	Slovak	123	4.52	2.284	0.206			
SPAS	Roma	84	23.04	8.204	0.895	-3.994	0.000	-0.583
	Slovak	113	28.27	9.675	0.910			

Legend: N = frequency, M = mean, SD = standard deviation, SEM = standard error of the mean, t = t-value, p = significance

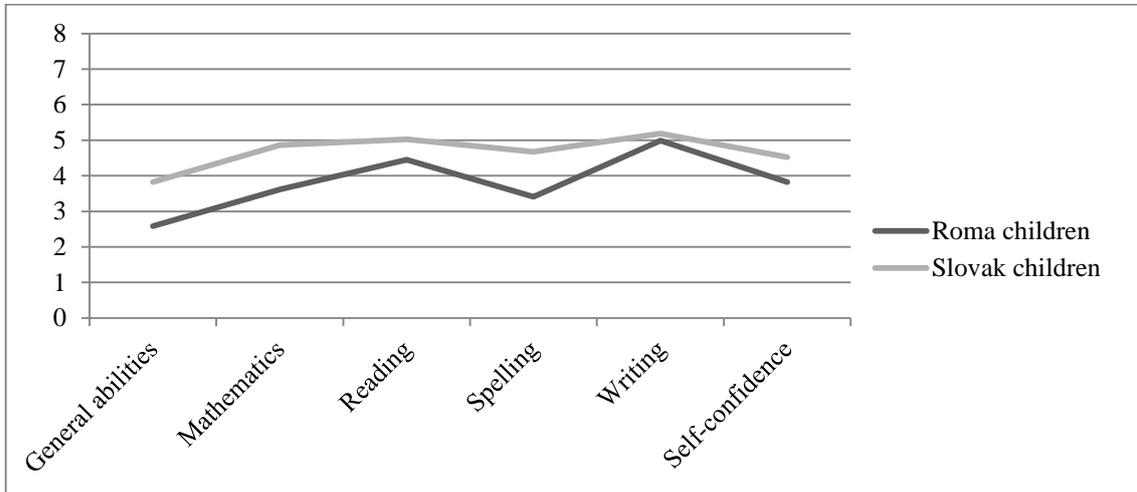


Figure 1. Comparison of Roma and Slovak Children – raw scores of school self-concept subscales

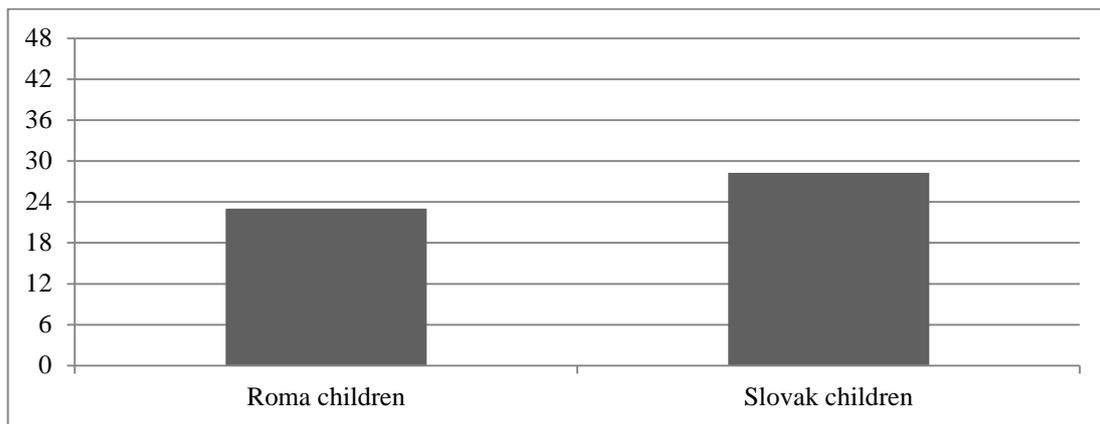


Figure 2. Comparison of Roma and Slovak children – total raw scores of school self-concept

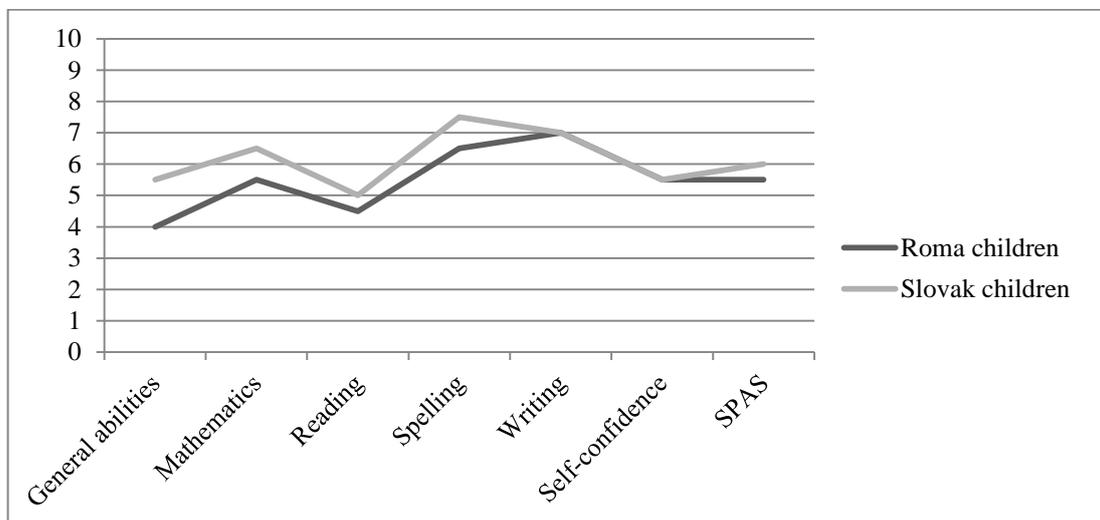


Figure 3. Comparison of school self-concept in Roma and Slovak children – sten estimates (original norms, 1992)

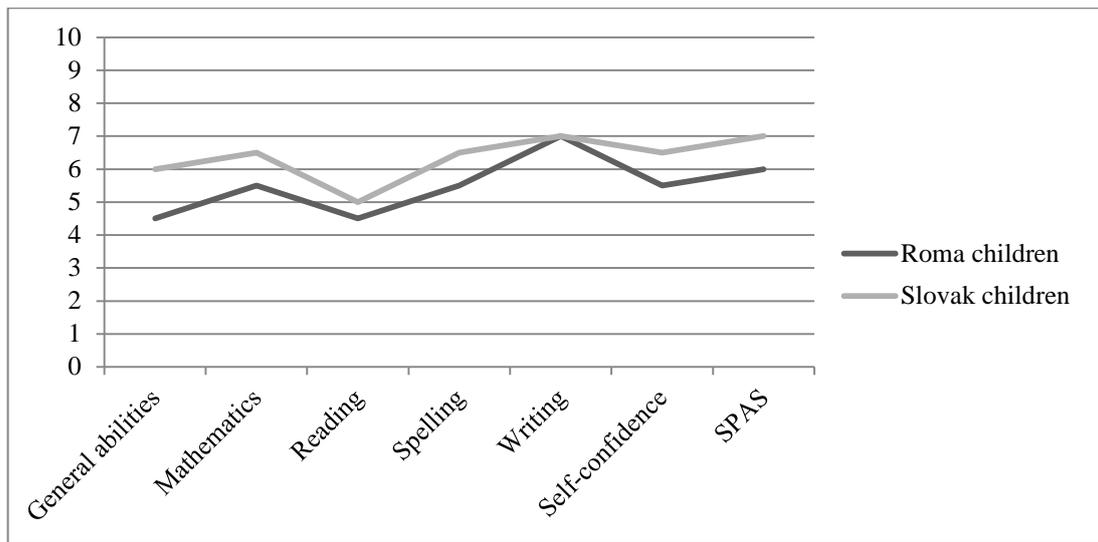


Figure 4. Comparison of school self-concept in Roma and Slovak children – sten estimates (new norms, 2015)

Table 2. Relationships between grades in profiling subjects (Slovak language, Maths) and school self-concept (total scores and subscale scores)

Correlation coefficients	Roma children		Slovak children	
	Slovak language	Maths	Slovak language	Maths
General abilities	-0.110	-0.227*	-0.403**	-0.398**
Mathematics	-0.113	-0.325**	-0.264**	-0.498**
Reading	-0.125	-0.065	-0.287**	-0.206*
Spelling	-0.166	-0.169	-0.542**	-0.332**
Writing	0.079	0.090	-0.279**	-0.283**
Self-confidence	-0.202	-0.335**	-0.440**	-0.408**
SPAS	-0.143	-0.239*	-0.509**	-0.468**

Legend: * = correlation significant on level $\alpha \leq 0,01$; ** = correlation significant on level $\alpha \leq 0,001$

On the interpersonal level, school motivation is influenced by meeting the need to have one’s own status in a group of peers. The research findings suggest that Roma children in the class are socially isolated or belong to a class subgroup of equally isolated classmates with a similar school experience and similar school results (Čerešník, Čerešníková [20]; Šramková [21]). The study on school motivation by R. Rosinský [5] suggests that the strongest motive for learning in Roma children is a good relationship with their classmates while for Slovak children it is acquisition of wisdom itself.

At this level, teachers’ attitudes towards children and their performance are equally important. For most children, evaluation of their performance is important. If children’s school work is not appreciated or nobody pays attention to them, they lose motivation for this activity.

They have no reason for it because the efforts are not appreciated at all. The study results show also a fact that Roma children do not consider evaluation by grades appreciation of their efforts. As if Roma

children did not have achievement results incorporated in a school self-concept. We identified a weak relationship only between the grades in Maths and a level of the self-concept in the area of mathematical concepts and in the subscale Self-confidence. Thus, the better grade in Maths leads to the higher self-concept in this area and self-confidence. This finding corresponds with experiences of teachers of Roma children from socially disadvantaged environment that children are better at Maths than in other academic subjects. This phenomenon is observed from year 1, or rather, in a school maturity assessment (Čerešníková [12]; Čerešníková [22]).

In conclusion, we state the key findings of the study on the school self-concept in Roma children from socially disadvantaged environment in the lower secondary education:

- We identified a low affinity of school performance and its incorporations into a self-concept in a sense of interpretation and regulation scheme.

- In Roma children, we perceive indifferent attitudes towards school tasks whose contents do not correspond with their life experiences. They are distant from life “everydayness” of a person in socially disadvantaged environment.

- The assessment of the items saturating an attitude towards school is similar as in Slovak children; the same conclusions were brought also by other conducted studies ([23], [24]).

- The results of the comparison of the school self-concepts in Slovak and Roma children are similar as in the comparison of intact children and children with special educational needs. This finding corresponds with the Act No. 245/2008 [25] that includes children from socially disadvantaged environment in a group of children with special educational needs.

In the study, we also identified limitations, such as a lack of motivation in the Roma children to fill-in a self-assessment scale; and problems of some children with a level and speed of silent reading, which resulted in uncompleted questionnaires. Furthermore, we identified a higher rate of socially demanded responses. These limitations resulted in our decision in future research to use a combination of a questionnaire and a projective method, alternatively a projective method that would ensure a reduction of socially demanded responses and would be more attractive for the children.

5. Conclusion

The research results showed that school self-concept can be influenced by the socio-cultural environment. The significantly lower school self-concept can be the predictor of the negative attitude to the school. Thus we can consider the lower school self-concept for the possible predictor of the risk behaviour in this perspective.

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