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The effect of coaching on self-description of children in primary school

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the effects of coaching on the self-description of children in primary schools because self-description can have beneficial consequences throughout life. I proposed that coaching in primary schools positively affects the self-description of children and that perceived attention has a mediating role in this relation. To analyze this, students of 11 primary schools in one province filled in a questionnaire before and after an innovation on positive coaching, with 15 months between the pre-measure and the post-measure, 425 children filled in the pre-measure and 257 children filled in the post-measure. No significant results were found in the analysis, therefore, the hypotheses could not be supported. This study adds value by extending knowledge on the relation between positive coaching, perceived attention and self-description, specifically in primary schools.

The effect of coaching on self-description of children in primary school

Primary school education is of high importance for the development of a child. Early research on the effects of primary school on the development of a child indicated that the performance of a child in primary school is strongly related to performance in following phases of life (Lewis et. al, 1988). Moreover, they found that the differences between schools significantly affect cognitive performance in secondary school. This research indicated the need for further research into the effect primary education has on a child.

Although identifying how cognitive performance can be improved by teachers is a crucial aspect to improve effectiveness in primary school, cognitive performance is not the only aspect affected by primary education. Recent studies focussed also on the social-emotional performance of children because it positively affects school performance, and is also positively related to social skills, emotional skills, and behavior (Ruit, Gelden, Popeijus & van Veen, 2021). Therefore, in order to improve primary education and the effects it has on children, it is essential to consider both cognitive performance and social-emotional performance. However, partly due to the main focus on cognitive performance, there is a lack of academic research on social-emotional performance and how this can be improved in primary schools. Within sports, there has been much research on the effects of coaching on self-concept, Smith and Smoll (1990) found that especially children with a low self-concept benefit the most from coaching. However, within primary schools the effects of coaching behavior from the teacher on the self-description of the children lacks significant research. This is an important gap because of the influence self-description has on one's life. Thus, based on the gap in existing literature and the importance to fill this gap the following research questions has been drawn: To what extent does a coaching role of teachers in primary schools have a positive effect on the self-description of the students?

This research question will be answered by reviewing existing literature and analyzing data on primary schools. The data analyzed is gained through an intervention at a primary school with a focus on core qualities and regulating emotions through coaching. Teachers are trained to coach students with positive coaching through core qualities. Moreover, the self-determination theory provides important insights for answering this research question. Ryan and Deci (2017) describe the

self-determination theory as follows: “Its arena is the investigation of people’s inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration, as well as for the conditions that foster those positive processes.” Within this theory, the three innate psychological needs are the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. These three needs are important to explain how self-description can be affected by coaching because when these three needs are fulfilled in a classroom children will be more self-determined in their actions. This self-determination means that children act based on beliefs in their skills and knowledge and have confidence in their actions because of this belief (Anderman & Gray, 2015). One of the innate psychological needs described is relatedness, this need is further researched in this study by focussing on perceived attention.

This research contributes to academic knowledge in two ways. Firstly, this study adds value by analyzing the effects of a coaching role of the teacher on the self-description of the students in a specific age group in primary school. This is extremely important to identify what role teachers have in the development of self-description of their students and how they can make a positive impact by applying this knowledge. Second, previous research focussed on a direct effect of coaching on self-description, this study adds value by identifying potential mediating variables and adding these to the analysis.

Theoretical framework

In the following sections, existing research and literature is reviewed to define the definition of the variables and to draw hypotheses. First, self-description is defined and potential causes and consequences of self-description are identified. Second, the concept of coaching is defined in the context of teaching and the potential effects it has on children are elaborated on. Building on these two sections, knowledge on the relationship between coaching and self-description is discussed and the first hypothesis is drawn. Thereafter, the role of perceived attention in the relationship between coaching and self-description is discussed and based on these findings the second hypothesis is drawn. Lastly, a conceptual model is developed.

Self-description

Self-description is of high importance due to the positive and negative effects it can have on people throughout their whole life. Terry and Scott Huebner (1995) found that a good self-description positively affects happiness throughout life. In that sense, teachers can potentially have a positive effect on the life satisfaction of children if they can improve the self-description of their students. On the other hand, a negative self-concept can have a tremendous effect on one's life. Tarlow and Haaga (1996) found that a negative self-concept is an prominent aspect of depression, indicating the importance of having a positive self-concept.

Because of the tremendous effects a positive or negative self-description can have on people, it has gained a lot of attention in psychological research. However, it is also a complex concept which is influenced by many factors in one's life which makes it a difficult concept to define. Therefore, throughout the past decades researchers have aimed to accurately define self-description in order to thoroughly research the causes and effects of self-description. Rosenberg (1979) developed a self-esteem self-reporting instrument, which is still widely used, and defined self-description as "Self-esteem is the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object". This view clearly aims to define self-description as a broad concept and still is not very precise. However, it illustrates that self-description is based on how one feels and thinks regarding themselves. Recent research into self-description defined it as the self-understanding of an individual in terms of what beliefs one holds over themselves, what characteristics, features, and capabilities one has as an individual and how this differentiates, or not, from other people (Bax, Samsen-Brondsveld, van Elderen & van Horssen-Sollie, 2021). Thus, self-description of students is not only defined and determined by how students view themselves and which beliefs they hold regarding themselves, but also how they differentiate themselves from other students in the classroom.

In order to identify how self-description can be affected it is important to research existing literature which identifies factors of influence. Self-description is related to numerous factors but generally develops in three groups: Family, friends, and schools (Wagner & Valtin, 2004). Within schools there are also many factors potentially affecting the self-description of students. Previous research indicated that self-description is correlated with academic achievements, the degree to which teachers support their students, and how the teachers interact with their students (Wagner & Valtin,

2004). An example of an interaction style in schools is positive coaching by the teachers. Moreover, Bax et al. (2021) defined self-description as how characteristics, features, and capabilities differentiate one from others. The positive coaching intervention focuses on identifying and emphasizing the unique qualities of students. Thus, this differentiates the students from each other based on the unique characteristics, features, and capabilities. Therefore, this study focuses on the potential effects of a coaching role of teachers on the self-description of children in primary school, as will be discussed in the following section.

Coaching and self-description

In childhood, children receive much guidance from older people aiming to support a child, it is an essential part of the upbringing and the development of children. Since coaching is a broad concept, it is crucial to define it precisely. Deiorio, Skye, and Sheu (2017) defined academic coaching as a way of facilitating students to achieve their fullest learning potential. This definition illustrates the importance of coaching within schools and is an important aspect of the focus of this study on positive coaching in primary schools. Since, the purpose of a school is to facilitate learning for children, aiming to facilitate the opportunity for students to achieve their fullest learning potential is an important goal. Within a school setting, Kenny and Faunce (2004) found that coaching elementary and secondary school students positively affects the college entry examination scores of students. Besides researching the potential benefits of coaching in general, others looked specifically at positive coaching and what effects it has. The differences in benefits between coaching in general and positive coaching are important to identify because the focus of this research is on positive coaching. Van Zyl et. al (2020) conducted a literature on this and defined positive coaching as follows: “Positive psychological coaching can be defined as a short to medium term professional, collaborative relationship between a client and coach, aimed at the identification, utilization, optimization, and development of personal strengths and resources in order to enhance positive states, traits, and behaviors.”. This definition highlights the aim of positive coaching and the effects it aims to achieve which are highly relevant in the intervention used in this research. Moreover, van Zyl et. al (2020) found that the positive coaching approach supports people to use their talents and it positively affects several aspects of the individual, namely their performance, life-satisfaction, self-efficacy, and

self-confidence. Building on the existing literature and the establishment that self-description is the same as self-confidence, I propose the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 1:** A coaching role of the teacher positively affects the self-description of the children*

In order to determine whether the relationship between a coaching role of the teacher and the self-description of the children is direct or indirect, the next section will discuss a potential mediator.

Mediating role for perceived attention

Coaching by teachers with a focus on core qualities can be perceived as a form of increased attention by the students, because the methodology of coaching while working with core qualities requires additional attention of the teacher towards the students. Coaching in education is a method to support students in primary school by providing guidance and focussing on positive aspects of the children. Although coaching has many different forms and definitions (Ives, 2008), every definition considers increased attention to a specific aspect of one's behavior in order to increase that aspect. Thus, the definition of coaching logically suggests that one being coached might feel that they perceive more attention. The Sage Handbook of Mentoring and Coaching in Education (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012) discussed a study on coaching for children with behavioral problems and found that coaching could negatively influence the behavior of the children. This negative effect on behavior was not caused because of the coaching directly, but was caused by the increase in perceived attention due to the coaching. Therefore, whether coaching brings positive or negative effects, it can be established that coaching potentially increases perceived attention. Hence, it is interesting to study whether coaching has an effect on perceived attention by children in primary school and what affects perceived attention has on the children.

In the upbringing of a child, the attention the child receives plays a significant role in the development by reducing negative behaviors and increasing the self-description (Mullan & Higgins, 2014). Therefore, the effects of the attention a student perceives from the teacher could potentially positively affect the self-description of the student. In longitudinal study into sixth and seventh grade students results were found that the self-esteem is significantly influenced by the school climate and evaluations by teachers (Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990), indicating that the teachers have an effect on the self-description of their students. Specifically on the effects of attention children receive and their

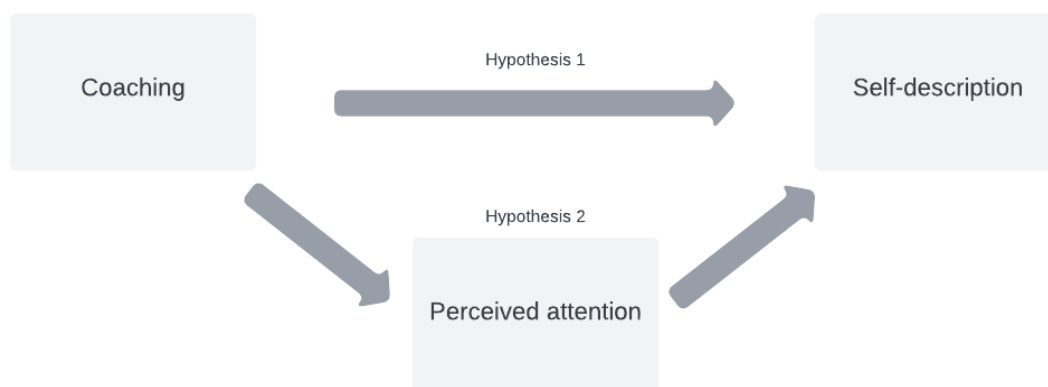
self-description, Canfield (1990) argued that the attention and positive nurturing children receive both at home and at school positively affects the self-esteem of children. Thus, perceived attention by children potentially positively affects self-description of children.

Therefore, based on existing literature on the relationship between coaching and perceived attention and between self-description and perceived attention, I propose the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *The relationship between a coaching role of the teacher and the self-description of the children is mediated by the perceived attention of the child*

Conceptual model

Based on the existing literature, theory development, and the proposed hypotheses, the following conceptual model is developed:



Method

Participants

In this research there were two groups, the teachers and the students, who were investigated independently from each other. The teacher group consisted of XX participants. These people were recruited by the head principals of ten different primary schools all belonging to one school group. The schools all took part in an innovation, and to investigate the experience with this, the teachers were asked to take part in this questionnaire. The focus of this study is on the group of students.

The group of students of the premeasure includes 425 primary students in the highest grades (groep 6-8 in the Dutch system) and were recruited via their teachers to take part in the questionnaire. After deleting 37 datasets that were not completely filled in and 13 datasets for other reasons (see

appendix), there were 375 participants taken into this research. The age of the children ranged from 8 to 13 ($M=10.46$; $SD=.97$). The genders were divided into 45.40% girls, 49.50% boys and 5.10% chose another option.

The postmeasure group includes 257 primary students. After deleting 9 datasets that were not completely filled in and 11 datasets for other reasons (see appendix), there were 237 participants taken into this research. The age of the children ranged from 8 to 13 ($M=10.64$; $SD=1.16$). The genders were divided into 43.40% girls, 51.60% boys and 5.00% chose another option. The attrition-rate is 46.30%.

Procedure

The participants were recruited through the school directors, who shared the study information with the teachers, the students, and the parents of the students. The first participants were recruited for the pre-measure, which took place in January 2022, before the start of this specific bachelor thesis research. In February 2022, the implementation of the innovation started.

The participants of the post-measure were recruited at the same schools in the same way, but differed from the participants of the pre-measure, especially the student sample. For this research, everyone was provided a document with additional information regarding the procedure of the research.

Thereafter, we sent the online questionnaires to the school director who distributed it to the teachers and the students. When opening the questionnaire, participants were asked if they consented to participating in this research and to their data being used for research purposes. Following, the participants were able to fill in the online questionnaire. The teachers and students received a different survey, focusing on similar elements, but adapted to their role and age. Both teacher groups received the same survey, once as a pre-measure before the implementation of the innovation, the second time after the implementation. The same set-up was used for the surveys for the student groups. The length of the questionnaires was approximately 20 minutes and could be completed at school by the children, and anywhere by the teachers. The questionnaires and all communication regarding the study was in Dutch. The student questionnaire measured 4 dependent variables, namely personal development possibilities as provided by the teacher, basic psychological needs, happiness, and general self description. Next to this, we also collected demographic data on students. These were gender, age, school name, class name, and combination group. We also assessed whether children sometimes

worked on tasks together with older or younger students in their combination group and if so, how often. Students completed this questionnaire up to 3 times. They first filled it in about the teacher that was present that day. Then, if applicable, children also answered the same questionnaire about their other teacher not being present at the day of assessment. Lastly, if applicable, pupils answered the questionnaire for their teaching assistant.

The teacher questionnaire measured eight dependent variables, namely growth mindset versus fixed mindset in teaching, autonomy, connectedness, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, beliefs about personal development, own professional role regarding personal development, emotional sensitivity. We also collected demographic information about the teachers including their gender, age, whether they work as a substitute teacher, years of working as a teacher, years working at current school, the age of students they teach and if they work as a teaching assistant.

The participants did not receive any compensation for their participation. The teachers received an ID by which they could be identified within the study, the students did not fill in information by which they could be identified. Data is modified so that no participant can be privately identified. This research plan was approved by the Ethics Committee Psychology of the University of Groningen.

Measures

General Self-Description. The assessment of students' general self-description was based on the Self Description Questionnaire (SDQ II) of Marsh (1992). The part of the questionnaire consisted of 7 items in total, of which 3 items were reversed. A sample item for a non-reversed positive self-description measure is "I am satisfied with myself". A sample item for the reversed scale would be "Sometimes I think I am not good at all." Answers were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *does not fit at all*, 5 = *fits very well*). See Appendix A for all items. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.747.

Perceived attention To assess how students perceived that their teachers contributed to their personal development, we used a self-created questionnaire that consisted of 3 items. The questionnaire scale included items such as "My teacher pays attention to me". Answers were rated on

a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). See Appendix A for all items. Cronbach's alpha for the personal development as provided by teacher scale was 0.801.

Results

To analyze the data, assumptions were checked to ensure the right analysis was used. Before running the assumptions, data was excluded due to incompleteness of the survey and due to unserious answers. The first assumption checked for an independent sample t-test was that there should be no significant outliers. A box plot was created to check for outliers, three outliers were found who filled in the minimum or maximum at every question and those were also excluded from the analysis. Secondly, a plot illustrated that the assumption that the dependent variable should be normally distributed was not violated. Thirdly, Levene's test illustrated that the variances for self-description were equal $F(1,652) = 1.535, p = 0.216$. Lastly, in an independent sample t-test there should be independence of observations. Although the data could not be matched this assumption might be violated due to limitations of the data, this will be further discussed in the discussion section.

The descriptive statistics and correlations (table 1) illustrate that there is no multicollinearity between the variables in the analysis. Moreover, a weak positive correlation between self-description and perceived attention was found, $r(610) = 0.09, = p < 0.05$.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Intervention ^a	612	0.39	0.49	-	-	-
2. Self-description	612	3.80	0.68	-.04	-	-
3. Perceived attention	612	3.70	0.82	.001	.332**	-

^a 0 = pre-measure and 1 = post-measure.

* $p < .01$.

Table 2**Results of independent samples t-test**

Intervention	Pre-Measure		Post-Measure		$t(610)$	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Self-description	3.82	.69	3.77	.65	.995	.320
Perceived attention	3.70	.81	3.70	.85	-.033	.974

Hypothesis Testing

An independent sample t-test was performed to compare the means of self-description between the group in the pre-measure and the post-measure (Table 2). This study found that self-description was lower ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.65$) in the post-measure than before the intervention ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.69$), $t(610) = 0.995$, $p = 0.320$. However, this difference is very small and not significant at the 5% level. Therefore, hypothesis 1, suggesting that a coaching role of the teacher positively affects the self-description of the children, could not be supported by the data.

Lastly, an independent sample t-test and a regression were performed to test the mediating effect of perceived attention on the relation between coaching and self-description. The analysis indicated (table 2) that the perceived attention was higher ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.85$) in the post-measure than in the pre-measure ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.81$), $t(610) = -0.33$, $p = 0.974$. Moreover, the analysis illustrated (table 3) that perceived attention positively and significantly affects self-description, $R^2 = 0.11$, $F(1, 610) = 75.423$, $p = 0.000$. We could not confirm hypothesis 2 suggesting that the relationship between a coaching role of the teacher and the self-description of the children is mediated by the perceived attention of the child as the results indicated that coaching did not have an effect on perceived attention. However, a positive relation between perceived attention and self-description was found in the analysis.

Table 3

Regression

Variable	R2	F(1,610)	Sig.
1. Regression ^{ab}	.110	75.42	0.00

^a Dependent variable: Self-description

^b Predictor: Perceived attention

Discussion

The aim of this research was to identify the potential effects of coaching in primary schools on the self-description of children. Moreover, the role of perceived attention as a mediator between coaching and self-description was investigated. Previous research indicated that coaching supports people to use their talents and positively affects performance, life-satisfaction, self-efficacy, and self-confidence (van Zyl et. al, 2020). Therefore, the role of coaching in the development of children is an interesting and important topic to expand on. This study found no significant results to support the hypothesis, which is based on existing literature discussed above, that a coaching role of the teacher positively affects the self-description of the children in the class. Moreover, no significant effect was found from coaching on perceived attention. The analysis did indicate a significant positive effect of perceived attention on self-description. Therefore, although a positive effect of perceived attention on self-description was found, a mediating role of perceived attention was not confirmed because there was no significant effect of coaching on perceived attention.

Theoretical implications

Although the hypotheses were not confirmed by the analysis, this study expands on existing literature in two ways. Firstly, the analysis illustrated a positive effect of perceived attention by the children on the self-description, indicating that self-description is influenced by the attention one perceives to receive. Previous research did not take the role of perceived attention into account in their research and these findings suggest that perceived attention potentially has an important role in determining self-description. Secondly, the analysis illustrated that coaching did not have a significant effect on both self-description and perceived attention. This could potentially be caused by the study

design and provide essential implications for future research, this will be further discussed in the next section.

Strengths and limitations

These findings are surprising because previous research indicated that coaching and working with core qualities has a positive effect on the self-concept of children (Ruit et al., 2021). A potential reason for that the hypotheses could not be confirmed is due to cultural differences. Recent studies which identified positive effects of coaching and working with core qualities were performed in regions, the effects of positive coaching might differ between children in different regions. Moreover, in the study of Ruit et al. (2021) there was a positive significant effect of the intervention on several domains of self-concept found but not on the general self-concept. Different results might have been found in this study when several dimensions of self-description and self-concept were measured.

Moreover, several limitations are identified regarding the study. Firstly, a proportion of the teachers likely did not implement the coaching as intended. Some teachers indicated that they felt the coaching innovation was not necessary or that it was not a focus area for them. This could have negatively affected the effectiveness of the coaching method and could be a reason why there were no results found that supported the hypotheses. Secondly, it is a self-reported measure which was filled in by children, children might not have taken the questionnaire seriously and did not think their answers through. Although in some cases it was clear that a participant did not take the questionnaire seriously and those were removed, there are probably more cases which could not be identified. Thirdly, there was no control group of schools where the intervention was not implemented, this could have been helpful to identify effects of the intervention. Fourthly, there were school inspections just before post-measure regarding cognitive development, this could have shifted focus from the teachers and directors from social-emotional development towards cognitive development, as only the latter is a strong focus for the inspection. Lastly, the participants in the pre-measure and in the post-measure could not be matched, this limited the options for analysis and, therefore, the results.

Besides the limitations, there are also several strengths of this study. The longitudinal design of the study enables to study the effects of coaching throughout time and establish the effects of the intervention. This strength could be further improved by adding a third measurement point after more

years to see the long-term effects of coaching and working with core qualities. Moreover, all participating schools were located in one province, this limited the effects of cultural differences significantly.

Future research

Building on the strengths and limitations of this research, we propose several directions for future research. Future research should identify whether a study design where coaching is implemented in the first grade of primary school and measured until elementary school could illustrate stronger effects due to long term application of the positive coaching and working with core qualities. Furthermore, adding an anonymous ID in the questionnaire which makes it possible to match the students with their teachers and the pre-measure with the post-measure can be highly beneficial to identify important results. By applying this, an analysis solely on teachers who took the coaching seriously and their students could provide insightful results on the effects of the intervention. Furthermore, future research can consider applying positive coaching and working with core qualities in a different environment. For example, it can be highly beneficial for firms to improve the effectiveness and team bonding by applying positive coaching in their firm because in other fields it has been shown to have significant benefits. Future researchers can study this to discover the effectiveness of positive coaching for adults.

Conclusion

To conclude, although no significant results were found in the analysis to confirm positive effects of the intervention, teachers and researchers can still learn from this study. A significant positive effect of perceived attention on self-description was found, knowledge on this relation could be further developed in future research. Moreover, this study has practical implications for teachers. Previous research identified multiple positive effects of positive coaching and working with core qualities, therefore, teachers should aim to develop their knowledge on this method of teaching and applying this in order to improve the social-emotional development of their students.

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Appendix

Appendix A (Questions in questionnaire which are used in the thesis):

Self-Description
I am satisfied with myself
Sometimes I think I am no good at all (R)
I can do things as well as most other children
I feel useless at times (R)
I don't have much to be proud of (R)
I feel that I am at least as valuable as others
I think positively about myself
Perceived Attention
My teacher pays attention to me
My teachers pays attention to how I feel
My teachers gives attention to how I feel