



Children's Declining Perceptions of Competence: Inevitable or Manufactured?

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Research has consistently shown that children's perceptions of their academic competence declines from about the time they begin formal schooling. Researchers have attributed the decline to increased attention to and ability to process evaluative feedback as well as shifts in how children define success. Research findings will be presented which suggest that educational contexts may also play a role. In the first study of 4-7 year olds, declines in perceived competence were found when children rated themselves, but not when they rated their classmates, suggesting that the decline cannot be entirely explained by cognitive capacities to process evaluative feedback. In a second study, 5-6 year olds in classrooms in which teachers provided salient evaluative performance feedback rated their academic competence lower than children in classrooms that were focused more on learning and process. In a third study, children aged 4-6 in classrooms that were narrowly focused on academic achievement had lower perceptions of their competence as well as lower expectations for success, preference for challenge and pride in accomplishments than children in classrooms that encourage children's choices and initiative. In the final study 9-12-year olds' motivation was strongly associated with the kind of written feedback teachers gave them. Taken together the studies presented suggest that developmental change in children's perceptions of their academic competence is affected by an interaction between their cognitive capacities to process evaluative feedback and the nature of feedback they receive. Findings suggest practical strategies for preventing the decline.