Case study: big-fish-little-pond effect

Self-concept and the selective schools dilemma: What do you think?

The big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE) helps us to understand how students develop their self-concept within the social context of the school. Social comparison plays a big part in developing students’ views of themselves. In particular, students compare their own academic ability with that of their peers and this contributes to their academic self-concept. Consider the following case study about Cassie:

Cassie is a student of average ability. She moves from a school where she is performing above the average. She is said to be a big fish in a little pond academically because there is not a lot of competition for her at her school and her grades are well above average. Her academic self-concept is high because she is comparing herself with many peers who are academically less able than she. Her parents decide she should sit for the Selective Schools Test and she passes. She is placed in Hillcrest Selective High School where she becomes a little fish in a big pond academically and socially. When Cassie sits the first round of class tests, she finds that she is no longer near the top of the class. Her rank is about halfway down the list. Her academic self-concept falls when she compares herself to the more able students in her class. She is suddenly confronted with the fact that she is no longer one of the brightest students in the class and she readjusts her academic self-concept to reflect her new standing in the new academic environment.

Marsh (1993) would predict that Cassie would be likely to select less-demanding subjects in the selective high school. For example, she might select two units of English in Year 11 rather than the extension course. She is also likely to have a lower academic self-concept, lower educational aspirations and lower occupational aspirations than if she had attended a comprehensive high school. Marsh concludes that selective or higher-ability schools do not necessarily advantage students.
Activities

1. Why might Cassie, and other students like her, react the way Marsh predicts?
2. Do you agree that the selective high school environment might not be an advantage to students?
3. What might schools do to reduce the “big fish little pond effect” on students like Cassie?

References