Perception of Self' Among School Going Adolescents in India

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The journey of understanding the 'self' is often influenced by cultural orientations and the nurturing environment of individuals, including personal, social, and emotional dimensions. This article aims to explore perceptions among school-going adolescents about themselves and is based on data from the 'Mental Health and Well-being of School Students' survey in India. The findings reflect adolescents' satisfaction with their personal and school life but also highlight concerns such as difficulty initiating conversations and hesitancy in asking questions. The impact of COVID-19 on adolescents' mental health is also highlighted. The article emphasizes that understanding the perception of 'self' during adolescence can help in targeted interventions by teachers, school administrators, parents, and policymakers to promote mental health and well-being among adolescents.

Keywords: Mental Health, Adolescents, Culture, Emotional Well-being, Personal and Social Self

"A man is but the product of his thoughts. What he thinks, he becomes."- Mahatma Gandhi

The 'Self' and its Significance during Adolescence

Psychologists through the years have attempted to provide a comprehensive definition of the concept of self. The concerns and questions related to self are universal and arise for every individual. The definition of self is undoubtedly dynamic and ever-evolving, as the self is constantly emerging. The context in which the self is nurtured plays an important role in the life of an individual. Recognizing and addressing the impact of the nurturing context which nurtures the 'self' in individuals, is essential for promoting positive development and well-being throughout an individual's life. Cultural orientations alsohavea profound impact on the 'self' as these orientations have a marked influence onhow individuals perceive their worth and identity and how they are placed within a society. For instance, in individualistic cultures, adolescents navigating their identities may focus on personal aspirations and self-expression, striving for independence, whereas, in collectivist cultures, adolescents may place greater emphasis on family and community ties, seeking a sense of belongingness and contributing to group well-being as part of ones' own well-being.

In psychology, various terms are used to describe different aspects of the self, including self-efficacy, self-worth, self-image, self-concept, and self-esteem. Each of these constructs is important in the process of development of the 'self'. In this article, the

self is seen through one's perception of personal self, which includes satisfaction with life, responsibility, and body image, and perception of self through other's opinions, which involves interactions with peers, and communication style. The perception of self in the article can be best understood through the 'sense of self' which is the individuals' capability of perceiving the self (Bollas, 1995).

The understanding of self is a crucial aspect for adolescents, as at this age individuals are exploring and developing a sense of self that includes their interests, beliefs, values, etc. The mental health of school students includes the individuals' emotional, social, and personal aspects of life that serve as protective factors for their mental well-being. Understanding and knowing about these factors can not only help to change the more visible and stigmatized view about mental health but can also make us focus on the less visible aspects of the individual's life that lay the foundation of perception of self. Also, if adolescents are nurtured with care based on an understanding of how they perceive themselves, it will go a long way to ensure holistic development of the adolescents.

Adolescence is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood. One can observe major changes in 3 domains - *physical changes* observed during this stage are the development of the brain, growth spurt and attaining of sexual maturity; *cognitive changes* during this stage are the development of abstract thinking and using logic in their day-to-day life as well as rely heavily on concrete strategies; and *socioemotional changes* like increased independence from parents, developing strong peer relationshipsand seeking peer acceptance and need for appreciation for a growing sense of self-identity.

A major milestone of this stage is developing a sense of identity i.e., the urgent need to find an answer to 'Who am I?'. According to the psychosocial stages of development (Erikson,1980), adolescent goes through the stage known as 'identity versus role confusion' where they try to understand their own values, beliefs, goals, and aspirations so as to establish their identity. This is an important and significant stage of development as it helps enable them to have a strong sense of self and direction in life.

The need to establish personal and social identity leads to increased risk-taking behaviour driven by the desire for peer acceptance. Adolescents become highly sensitive and experience heightened emotions, often reacting strongly to various situations, and it is recognized that emotions are cultural products that can be acquired through social rules of society (Sibia, 2013). They express their identity through choices in diet, outfits, activities, and social interactions, aiming to communicate who they are as individuals. Social interactions change significantly as they spend more time with peers, both in person and online, and desire greater autonomy. These are some ways in which adolescents seek to define their sense of self.

Another important factor in recent times that plays a crucial role in the formation of 'self' during adolescence is media. Adolescents rely heavily on social media platforms and the norms set by the interactions on such platforms. They observe the actions and behaviour that receive appreciation (as indicated by the number of likes, follows, etc.) and try to replicate such behaviour. However, suchbehaviour can be positive as well as negative.

'Self' in the Indian and Western Perspective

The role of socio-cultural context in nurturing the 'self' is unrefutable. The context in which an individual lives, interests, and

functions play a significant role in defining one's 'self'. The understanding of 'self' in Western culture is viewed as independent from others, whereas in the Indian context, the self has been associated with the well-being and spiritual growth of an individual (Misra and Paranjpe, 2012), i.e., it is viewed from a socio-cultural perspective. This perspective adds much importance to the collective nature of its society and thus an individual defines oneself much larger than one's personal attributes and brings in one's membership in the society – its norms, beliefs, values, etc. Therefore, an interdependence of one's own self and others is experienced by the self. Indian philosophical systems, as mentioned in 'Individual and Relational Conceptions of Self' (Misra et al., 2004), embrace both deep inner spirituality and duty-based socio-moral obligations. This entails an individual's internal and often spiritual journey being linked to a larger spiritual realm (or within society, fulfilling one's role within a hierarchical social structure).

InIndian context, self includes biological, social, mental as well as spiritual facets of human existence which are represented by âtman, puruca, jîva, dehî, kcetrajña, ahaAkâra, ahambhâva, asmitâ, jñâtâ, bhoktâ, and kartâ. These aspects are used in different contexts with specific meanings and significance. (Salagame, 2010). Another distinction between Western and Indian perspectives is the boundary between self and environment.The 'self' in the Indian context is constructed around 'we', 'our', and 'us', in contrast to the Western context where 'I' and 'my'are the primary focus of the 'self' (Sibia &Misra, 2011). Hence, in Indian perspective the 'self' is always in relation to one's social context', while in Western culture, there is a fixed boundary between self and others creating clear dichotomies. Whereas in Indian culture the boundaries are constantly shifting, such that the self can expand to blend with the cosmos,and in the next moment it can detach itself from it. However, the influence of context and the socio-cultural milieu in which the adolescents are presently living cannot be sidelined altogether and therefore while discussing the results reference will be made to the Indian perspective as well, in understanding the voices of adolescents in India.

'Self' and its Relationship with Mental Health and Well-being

The mental health and well-being of students serve as a fundamental basis for overall development. It serves as the base for cultivating essential qualities and life skills that contribute to their overall growth, self-preservation, and sustained development.Perception about oneself plays a substantial role in one's optimal functioning. It affects different spheres of one's life including physical, social and mental aspects. With time and lived experiences there are changes in the way the self is defined, it is influenced by people in the environment, situation, and culture ((Misra et al., 2004; Pestana, 2014).

During the adolescent years the process of defining 'self' not only is initiated with much focus but also undergoes significant changes. There is a systematic process through which adolescents go through to develop their self-concept. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines self-concept as 'One's description and evaluation of oneself, including psychological and physical characteristics, qualities, skills, roles and so forth'. Over the passage of years, this self-concept contributes to the individual's sense of identity and further leads to creating an ideal self. Carl Roger (1959), who had worked extensively on self, mentioned that personality is formed of the 'real' self and 'ideal' self. The 'real' self is the actual self of the individual which reflects one's true qualities, inclinations, characteristics, and

aptitudes. Whereas the 'ideal' self refers to the one that the individual aspires to be. When the individual perceives that the real and ideal self is in congruence or alignment then they have efficient problem-solving skills, increased creativity, and a high level of self-confidence. However, if they perceive an incongruence between the 'real' self and the 'ideal' self then it results in various maladaptivebehaviour and emotional problems.

Different coping strategies are often dependent on the availability of resources and perception of control.One such type of coping aims to bring changes in one's own self and involves the degree to which the person adapts to environmental stresses (Dalal&Misra, 2006). This also highlights the importance of self-understanding for building resilience and helping in coping with the challenges and transitional phases of life.

The development of self-concept depends on various factors like people in their home and school environment - parents, teachers/tutors, and caregivers. Various research shows that the educational system also has a major influence on the formation of one's self-concept (Shavelson et al., 1976;Liu, 2009). Also, one's emotions and thoughts (Roger, 1959; Carver &Scheier, 2006) play a critical role in developing the self-concept and forming their personality. The present study attempts to explore the perceived self from a Rogerian perspective.

Navigating Self-Perception Amid Global Uncertainty

The importance of self-understanding for the mental health and well-being of adolescents has become even more pronounced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. WHO declared the COVID outbreak a global emergency in 2019, causing significant social disruption and affecting the educational system.The pandemic pushed the efforts and talks on mental health-related issues to the forefront and has prompted individuals to re-evaluate their priorities, goals, and sense of purpose in life in general and remarkably to adolescents.

The resulting lockdown led to the closure of schools and impacted over 1.18 billion learners, forcing them to adapt to alternative learning methods such as home-based or online learning. The constant threat of the virus, coupled with social distancing measures and lockdowns, altered daily routines and disrupted the normalcy that otherwise played a crucial role in forming a stable sense of self.This unforeseen situation had wide-ranging effects on adolescents, including their academics, interpersonal relationships, social skills, and emotional well-being. The interruption in social functioning and community norms had an impact on their behavioural and mental health. The reduction in face-to-face connections has led to feelings of loneliness and isolation, impacting the social dimension of the self. The Report "On My Mind" (UNICEF, 2022) also outlines that about 21% of adolescents responded feeling loneliness, while loneliness has also been declared as a global public health concern (WHO, 2023).

Similar concerns, such as feelings of nervousness, anxiety, stress, overthinking, adjustment problems, etc. were observed from the calls received on the National Toll-free helpline under the Manodarpan, an initiative launched by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, in 2020 to provide psycho-social support to students, teachers, and parents. To cater to the educational, emotional and psychological needs of the students, the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 by the Government of India has focused on mental health and well-being underlying the significance of a holistic approach to education, and emphasizing the importance of emotional and social development.

It is well known that during adolescence, individuals undergo significant physical, psychological, and social changes. It becomes crucial to understand how adolescents perceive themselves during this transitional stage, especially in a country like India as it has the largest population of adolescents, comprising 21% (approximately 253 million) of the total population (UNICEF, n.d.). This means that one in every five individuals in India falls within the age range of 10 to 19 years. As adolescents make up a significant proportion of India's population, it is vital to understand the various determinants that impact their mental health and well-being by aiming to gain an understanding of how they perceive their 'self'. The insight gained will help teachers, school administrators, and parents in providing appropriate support to adolescents.

Method

The article is a part of the survey and is based on the findings of the survey (Mental Health and Well-being of School Students – A Survey, 2022) conducted by Manodarpan Cell. The survey was undertaken to gain an understanding of the perception of school students in India on different aspects of mental health and well-being. One of the aspects covered in the study was related to their perception about themselves. In the present paper, only the aspect of students' perception of their own self, and self as viewed in social context are focused.

Sample

The survey was conducted on students of the middle and secondary stage from grades VI-XII coming from all states and UTs of India. The data was collected from ten school types including Government (central and state) and private schools of the country. The sample included students aged between 11 to 18 years. A total of 3,79,842 students participated in the study.

Data Collection

The data collection was done through an online self-report questionnaire for students (Google Form) which was developed to understand the perception of students about themselves. The online survey mode gave students the comfort, privacy, and independence to express their views with minimum interferencefrom others. Research ethics were observed by making participation voluntary. Also, the anonymity of participants was ensured by making the name column optional, allowing students the comfort, privacy and independence to respond.

Analysis of Data

The data collected were sorted based on the school type, gender and school stage. Analysis was undertaken in terms of the percentage of responses on each criterion of personal self (comprising adaptability, trust, life satisfaction, personal accountability for success, body image, empathy, and self-esteem) and social self (including perceptions of happiness, leadership, trustworthiness, and responses to peer pressure).

Results

The data represents students' perspectives on various facets of their individual self and social self and the analysis is also based on these components. The analysis aimed to understand the self-perceptions of students, contributing to a more holistic understanding of their individual and social identities. Students' perceptions about their 'self' are as follows:

1. Understanding of Self

During adolescence, the student undergoes numerous changes and transformations. This encompasses their beliefs about their own identity, capabilities, and physical attributes. Consequently, grasping their perception about their own self is pivotal for comprehending their mental

well-being. The concept of self encompasses dimensions such as contentment in personal and academic spheres, achieving success in life, body image, empathetic perspective, self-assurance, and the ability to trust.

The table below highlights how adolescents perceive themselves during the middle stage (approximately 11-14 years) and the secondary stage of education (approximately 14-18 years), as well as across male and female students.

Table I. Students' responses on dimensions of understanding self

S.No.	Aspects	Overall	Stage		Gender	
			Middle (Age 11-14 years)	Secondary (Age 14-18 years)	Female	Male
1.	Responsibility of doing well in life	84	83	84	85	82
2.	Satisfaction with school life	73	81	68	75	72
3.	Body Image	55	62	52	54	56
4.	Satisfaction with personal life	51	58	46	50	52
5.	Adaptability	43	46	41	39	47
6.	Understanding different viewpoints	31	30.6	31.6	29	33
7.	Hesitation in asking question	28.4	27	29	28	29
8.	Trusting others	27	27.4	26.5	27	32.5
9.	Difficulty in initiating conversation	23	22	23	22	23

*The results are in terms of percentage (%) of students' responses.

The findings reveal that adolescents hold some aspects of understanding 'oneself' which may be considered as positive. For instance, 84% of adolescents perceived that doing well in life is their responsibility, and 73% were satisfied with their school life. The majority indicating an internal locus of control and a sense of responsibility for their lives, can be indicative of greater resilience to external pressures, as well as a stronger belief in their ability to choose and take actions according to their personal circumstances(Jain & Singh, 2015). Top of FormResearch has indicated that positive relationships established with peers and teachers by students help them to hold higher satisfaction with their school life (Smith, 2010). The social aspects of school life such as participation in activities like sports, music, competition opportunities to interact with their classmates, etc. help to increase students' feelings of belongingness and bonding with school facilitating their emotional and behavioural engagement with school (Chakraborty, 2020). However, students were unable to engage in such activities due to COVID-19 restrictions. Interestingly, the results revealed a higher level of satisfaction with school life compared to personal life, with 51% of adolescents sharing that they are satisfied with their personal life.

Adaptability is another important aspect not only in defining one's self but alsois an important quality in nurturing one's mental well-being. The ability to adapt oneself to a situation indeed helps individuals to deal with situations in a healthy and proactive manner and hence is a facilitator in promoting positive

relationshipsas well as reduce the scope for conflicts within relations. Adaptability also impacts the academic achievement and engagementof the students (Holliman et al., 2018). The findings of the survey indicate that 43% of adolescents perceive themselves as being quickly able to adapt to changes in life, which reveals that adolescent students have the qualities and abilities to foster healthy and positive relations.

The findings of the survey also reveal that 55% of studentsfelt comfortable with their appearance, which can have an immense impact on the mental health of adolescents (Shetty, 2016). 27% of students also reported that they easily trust others. Additionally, it was also observed that a small but significant proportion of students indicated that they experience difficulty in initiating conversation with others (23%) and hesitated in asking questions in the classroom (28.4%). Research also indicates that students' self-confidence impacts their relationships, learning,and sharing of opinions in the classroom (Akbari &Sahibzada, 2020).Another concern observed among adolescents was their inability to understand the perspective of others. Only 31% of students were able to consider other people's feelings, thoughts, and perspectives during a conversation.

The data have also been analyzed educational stagewise and gender-wise. A marked shift was observed in satisfaction levels as adolescents moved from middleto secondary stage of education, with a decline in satisfaction with personallife from 58% to 46% and school life from 81% to 68%in middle and secondary stagesof education respectively.

When the students transits from childhood to adolescence, they experience lots of changes and challenges like searching for their self-identity, changes in relationships, anxiety and uncertainty about their future as well as perception about their physical appearance. Thechange is also reflected in the findings related to body image, as students transition from the middle (62%) to the secondary (52%) stage. Gender-wise differences were however not observed among the sample population.

2. Understanding of Self through Others

The process of understanding oneself is significantly shaped by one's interactions and relationships with others. During this phase, adolescents frequently gauge themselves against their peers and seek validation from their social circles for their behavior and choices. Consequently, perceiving how others view oneselfbecomes a crucial component in understanding about self and this in turn plays a critical role in the mental well-being of students.

The understanding of self through others in the present article was understood through the aspects perceived by others as trustworthy,happy, teachers' perception of adolescents as a leader, and the influence of peers. The table below reflects adolescents' perception of how they are perceived by others across the middle (approx. 11-14 years)and secondary stages(approx. 14-18 years) and across male and female students.

The overall analysis of data on understanding of self through others indicates that adolescents have a positive social image of themselves. The findings revealed that 70% and 56% of adolescents responded that others perceive them as trustworthy and happy individuals respectively. This shows that students have a positive social perception of themselves as well as an understanding of emotional well-being. During adolescence, peers play a prominent role, and acceptance by peers is most sought by them. This psychological need often leads to conforming to their peers and is a common behaviour. They often want

to fit in and be liked or accepted by peers in order to be avoided or rejected by them. However, it is interesting to note that only 33% of adolescents express that they are influenced by their friends and conform with their peer group.

Table II. Students' responses on dimensions of understanding self through others

S.No.	Aspects	Overall	Stage		Gender	
			Middle (Age 11-14 years)	Secondary (Age 14-18 years)	Female	Male
1.	Perceived as Trustworthy	70	70.8	69.4	71.5	68
2.	Perceived as happy by others	56	57	55	58	54
3.	Influenced by Peers	33	34	32	31	34
4.	Perceived as a leader by teachers	25	28	22	24	26

*The results are in terms of percentage (%) of students' responses.

When students perceive that their teachers view them as capable leaders, it has a profound impact on their self-esteem, motivation, and overall development. However, the results of the study indicated that only 25%of adolescents believe that their teachers consider them to be capable leaders. This suggests that a significant majority of adolescents feel that their teachers lack faith in their abilities. This perception can impact not only the academic performance of the students but also their mental and emotional well-being. Among other factors, the lack of faith that teachers have in their students gives rise to unequal opportunities within the classroom.This may have a subsequent impact on their ability to initiate conversations and ask questions, as observed in Section 1, titled 'Understanding of Self.'

The result shows no significant difference in the stage or gender in the understanding of self through others.

Discussion and Conclusion

Self is an integral part of one's personality development. The development of self-concept depends on various factors such as parents, friends, peers, teachers, tutors, caregivers, and one's emotions and thoughts. The overall results on self-perception offer insights to the teachers, school administrators, and parents to understand the factors influencing an individual's self-development. This understanding helps them create a nurturing and supportive environment, for their holistic development.

The understanding of self by school-going adolescents in the Indian context suggests the prevalence of protective factors for mental health and well-being. Results indicate that concerning aspects such as taking responsibility of doing well in life, satisfaction with one's life (particularly school life), accepting and feeling satisfied with the way one looks (body image), the majority of the adolescents reported satisfaction and acceptance. On the other hand, facets like feelings of hesitance in asking questions and difficulty experienced in initiating conversation were reported by less percentage of adolescents, indicating their high levels of self–assuredness and confidence. This suggests the impact of being a member of Indian society, characterized by a collectivistic nature, where the concept of 'self' is defined not only by

individuality but also by one's socio-cultural surroundings (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994).

The overall result shows a healthy perception of themselves through others' perspectives as they indicated that they are considered a happy individual to be with. It is important to note that as the adolescents moved from the middle to secondary stage of education (i.e. 14 to 18 years) a marked shift in the negative was observed in the percentages of adolescent students feeling satisfied with their body image, personal and school life.Given that students typically seek approval and positive feedback from teachers in the classroom, the lower percentage of adolescent students reporting that they are perceived as leaders can be viewed as a concerning aspect. This could potentially impact the mental health of adolescents.

As an implication of the findings, educational institutions may need to focus on providing support and addressing challenges specific to the secondary stage of education, as well as the transitional period from middle to secondary stages. The need to strengthen the socio-emotional aspects of school set-up is evident in the findings of the study and is also suggested in NEP (2020) and NCF-SE (2023). Such provisions can help dispel students' hesitation in asking questions and build confidence to initiate conversations. The study also highlights the importance of considering the possible impact of the sudden outbreak of COVID-19, which may have influenced the reported satisfaction levels in the personal lives of students.

Perception of self is at the core of one's knowledge about oneself and is highly personal in nature. It was, therefore, considered to reflect adolescents' voices. Perhaps further exploration is needed to address the current inadequacies in dealing with the problem at hand. A focused study on the perception of self can help us understand the 'why' and 'how' of the responses received, which can further be utilized for promoting mental well-being of adolescents in schools.

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