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ABSTRACT

This study investigated factors related to Taiwanese senior high school students' self-esteem. A total of 1,672 students (779 boys, 893 girls) in Kaohsiung City in Taiwan completed a Chinese version of the Secondary Student Questionnaire (SSQ; Z. Hong, 2001). In addition, interviews were conducted with six students from three different high schools (high, moderate, and low academic achievement) in order to determine whether their paper and pencil responses were consistent with their actual perceptions. Results reveal six significant predictors of self-esteem for the total sample, two significant predictors for self-esteem of high academic achievement and low self-esteem students, and two significant predictors for the self-esteem of low academic achievement and high self-esteem students. Results contribute to the development of self-esteem theory and to theories of personality development for Taiwanese adolescent personality. The paper discusses some strategies for increasing students' self-esteem. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/SLD)

An Investigation of Self-Esteem and School Achievement of Taiwanese Secondary Students

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Abstract

This study investigated factors related to Taiwanese senior high school students' self-esteem. A total of 1672 (779 boys, 893 girls) students in Kaohsiung City in Taiwan completed a Chinese version of the Secondary Student Questionnaire (SSQ). Additionally, the first author individually interviewed 6 of the students from 3 different academic schools (high, moderate and low) in order to determine whether their paper and pencil responses were consistent with their actual perceptions. Results revealed 6 significant predictors of self-esteem for the total sample; 2 significant predictors for high academic achievement and low self-esteem (HALS) students' self-esteem; and 2 significant predictors for low academic achievement and high self-esteem (LAHS) students' self-esteem. Results hopefully contribute to further development of self-esteem theory, and to theories of Taiwanese adolescent personality development. Strategies for increasing students' self-esteem are suggested.

An Investigation of Self-esteem and School Achievement of Taiwanese Secondary Students

Research Background

In the last century, several theories of personality have included "self-esteem" as a significant variable. Early psychologists and sociologists, such as Willian James (1890) and G. H. Mead (1934), provided major insights and guidelines for the study of self-esteem. Their formulations (i.e., self-esteem = success / pretension) remain among the most cogent on the topic, particularly their discussion of the sources of high and low esteem. The self-psychologist, Rogers (1954), was interested in self-esteem, but was more concerned with the general nature of subjective experience and the individual's acceptance of her or his experience. He did not discuss the origins of self-esteem directly, but his discussion of the conditions that facilitate self-acceptance and diminish conflict contribute to the topic. Rogers proposed that all persons develop a self-image, which serves to guide and maintain their adjustment to the external world. In 1965, Morris Rosenberg, conducted a major empirical study of the social antecedents of self-esteem. His main findings indicated that social context does not play as important a role in interpreting one's own successes as has often been assumed, and that social prestige in the community had little influence on

self-esteem.

In 1961, the ego or self psychologist, Gordon Allport, identified seven different aspects of *selfhood* which are involved in the development of the proprium from infancy to adulthood. These different aspects of appropriate functions evolve slowly over time, and their ultimate consolidation constitutes the *self* as an object of subjective knowledge and feeling. Allport (1961) asserted that self-esteem is the third developmental stage of the proprium. " It is the feeling of pride that results when the child accomplishes things on his/her own. Self-esteem depends on the child's success in mastering tasks in the world" (Hjelle & Ziegler, 1992, p.250). In his theory, self-esteem is a subjective evaluation of one's self. Coopersmith (1967) further defined the meaning of the term "self-esteem" to be the evaluation an individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to oneself. It expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval and indicates the extent to which the individual believes oneself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy: "In short, self-esteem is a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward oneself" (Coopersmith, p.5). Similarly, Rosenberg (1965) stated, " high self-esteem means that the individual respects himself, considers himself worthy; low self-esteem, on the other hand, implies self-rejection, self-dissatisfaction, self-contempt" (p.31).

Shaffer (1988) explained *self-esteem* as another side to *self-concept*; children's feeling

about (or evaluation of) the qualities that they perceive themselves as having. Children with high self-esteem generally feel quite positively about their perceived characteristics, whereas, children with low self-esteem view the self in a less favorable light.

Empirical evidence indicates that self-esteem is a fairly good predictor of mental health in adults (Coopersmith, 1967) and adolescents (Rosenberg, 1986). In addition, high self-esteem has been positively correlated with creativity, academic achievement, resistance to group pressure, willingness to express unpopular opinions, and effective communication between parents and youth (Adair, 1984). Many investigators have explored the association between self-esteem and various social and psychological problems. Kaplan (1975) reviewed this literature and concluded that there are significant relationships between low self-esteem and delinquency, crime, alcoholism, drug abuse, mental disorders, aggressive behavior, and suicidal behavior. Rosenberg (1985) and Kaplan and Pokorny (1969) concluded that there is a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and depression. The relationship between self-esteem and school performance is primarily attributable to the effect of school performance on self-esteem (Faunce, 1984; Skaalvik, 1983).

Typically, academic achievement has been strongly related to self-esteem; many studies have demonstrated significant positive relationships between these variables (Faunce, 1984; Daniel, & King, 1995; Skaalvik, 1983). For example, Faunce (1984) interviewed members

of the senior class of a Michigan high school and found that academic achievement had an important impact upon self-esteem status. Skaalvik (1983) studied 348 children from five different class levels (2nd, 3rd, 4th 6th, 8th grade) in 15 Norwegian elementary schools. Results showed that from the 4th to the 8th class levels, low academic achievement was associated with low self-esteem and with strong perceived parental pressure for boys, but not for girls.

Objectives

Within Taiwan's educational system, the annual senior high school and college entrance examinations constitute a major source of anxiety for junior and senior high school students (Wu & Smith, 1997). As Chen (1981) indicated, unless children are among the 20% selected for senior high school, they generally perceive themselves as failures. These factors might cause some adolescents to doubt their self-worth even when they have demonstrated outstanding academic achievement. Conversely, despite these extreme pressures and poor academic achievement, some students may still have high self-esteem. While these studies indicate a positive relationship between self-esteem and performance for most individuals, two special groups of students are worthy of investigation. The first group is composed of students who are *high academic achievers* and who have *low self-esteem*. Since Taiwan's college and high school entrance exams are highly competitive, it is believed that there are many students who belong to this group. Such students may be at risk for poor

psychosocial functioning; for example, they may experience anxiety and depression. The second group is composed of students who are *low academic achievers* and who evidence *high self-esteem*. By identifying variables related to the self-esteem of these two groups, educators might be able to create more positive learning environments to help students with low self-esteem. Self-esteem must be a major concern of those responsible for planning and implementing curricula, not only within the confines of the family setting but also within the total school environment. Furthermore, greater understanding of how self-esteem influences adolescents would facilitate the development of training curricula and enrichment programs that complement cognitive components of knowledge acquisition and performance of adolescents in Taiwan secondary school settings. Students at the secondary school stage were targeted for study, because it is believed that there are still numerous opportunities for schools and families to develop strategies and interventions for strengthening their self-esteem. It was expected that the results of this study would have implications for the development of interventions to increase students' low self-esteem.

Bandura (1986) argued that students' self-esteem has a great potential for development and improvement. If teachers and parents can provide a more positive learning environment, then students might be more likely to develop positive personal perceptions, or high self-esteem. Theoretically, such self-esteem will play a significant role in the development

and maintenance of healthy psychosocial functioning in the future.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify the significant predictors of self-esteem for students' in Taiwan senior high school settings who vary in their self-esteem and academic performance. The research questions were as follows:

(1) What factors were significant predictors of self-esteem for the total sample?
(2) What factors were significant predictors for students with high academic achievement and low self-esteem (HALS)?
(3) What factors were significant predictors for students with low academic achievement and high self-esteem (LAHS)?

Methods

Participates and Procedure

The sample of 813 10th grade students and 859 11th grade students was obtained from ten senior high schools (2 high academic schools, $n = 337$; 4 moderate academic schools, $n = 684$; and 4 low academic schools, $n = 651$) which are representative of the schools in Kaohsiung City. Students are allowed to enroll at different academic schools based on their scores on a senior high school entrance examination. Students with high academic grades and low self-esteem were identified as the HALS group; students with low academic grades and high self-esteem were identified as the LAHS group. The overall sample's mean self-esteem score was 78; therefore, this score was used as a cutoff for high or low self-esteem students. Students who had grades of mostly A's or about half A's and half B's were categorized as having high academic achievement, and if their self-esteem total scores were

equal to or below 78 they were categorized as HALS. There were 113 students (41 boys, 72 girls) who met these criteria. Students who had grades of half C's and half D's, or mostly below D's were categorized as having low academic achievement, and if their self-esteem total scores were higher than 78 they were categorized as LAHS. There were 139 students (87boys, 52 girls) who met these criteria.

The first author and the school counselor went to the classrooms to explain the significance of the survey and to encourage participants to respond as thoroughly as possible to the Secondary Students' Questionnaires (SSQ). Additionally, the first author conducted individual follow-up interviews with 6 students to verify the SSQ responses. These students were randomly selected from each level school (i.e., high, moderate, and low achievement schools).

Instrument

Initial Draft. In order to conduct this study a 114-item draft version of the SSQ (Hong, 2001) was modified and first translated into Chinese in April 2001. In order to verify that the translation was accurate and clear, the initial draft of the Chinese version as well as the original English version, were submitted to two educational psychology faculty members and one English professor. In addition, another English professor was asked to back translate the Chinese version of the SSQ. Final corrections were then made to the SSQ.

Pilot Study. The SSQ was piloted with 79 Taiwanese senior high students (53 boys, 26 girls; 36 sophomores, and 43 juniors) from one moderate academic school in Kaohsiung City, Taiwan. The students' responses were used to determine if the Chinese version of the SSQ items functioned in the same way as the English version. Students' opinions regarding the ambiguity of questions were taken into consideration in preparing the final version of the

SSQ for use in the actual study.

Final Questionnaire. The SSQ consists of 114 items: 10 items elicit students' demographic information, and 104 items assess students' self-esteem (Items #1-58) (Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, CESI; Coopersmith, 1967), anxiety and depression (Items # 59-83) (Hopkins Symptom Checklist, HSCL-25; Derogatis et al., 1974) stereotypic thinking (Items #84-98)(Investigator-developed), personality characteristics and satisfaction with non-academic performance at school (Items # 99-104)(investigator developed). Summed responses to the self-esteem items comprised the dependent variable, while the other summed scores comprised the independent variables.

Data Analyses

Student responses to the SSQ were inputted into a data file and then a SPSS system file. The data were checked and cleaned before conducting the analyses. The following data analyses were conducted:

(1) A reliability analysis to screen for the best items (Cronbach coefficient alpha >.20) from SSQ.

(2) Calculated the percentages, means, and standard deviations for SSQ sections/ items to provide descriptive statistics.

(3) In order to examine interactions, two- way ANOVAs were used to compare the differences in self-esteem scores as a function of gender, academic achievement levels (high, middle and low), grades, anxiety, depression, stereotypic thinking, personality, and

home environment variables.

(4) Two different types of regression analyses were conducted. One entered all of the variables simultaneously and provided the weights for each variable as part of the entire model. Then three stepwise regressions were run to determine the significant predictors of self-esteem for the total sample, for students with high academic achievement and low self-esteem (HALS), and for students with low academic achievement and high self-esteem (LAHS).

Results

The results of stepwise regression analyses revealed that six significant predictors of the total sample's self-esteem were depression, personality and satisfaction with non-academic performance at school, parenting practices, grades, family income, and anxiety. Depression loaded first and explained 32.1% of the variance. The second most significant predictor was personality and satisfaction with non-academic performance which explained 13.1% of the variance. The third most significant predictor was parenting practice which explained 3.4% of the variance. The fourth most significant predictor was grade, which explained another 0.8% of the variance. The fifth most significant predictors were family income and anxiety; together, they explained another 0.3% of the variance. These six predictors accounted for

50% of the variance in total students' self-esteem.

The two significant predictors for high academic achievement and low self-esteem (HALS) students' self-esteem were depression and personality and satisfaction with non-academic performance at school. The strongest predictor was depression, which explained 24.4% of the variance. The second strongest and significant predictor was personality and satisfaction with non-academic performance, which explained 5.2% of the variance. Together they countered for 29.6% of the variance in HALS students' self-esteem.

The two significant predictors for low academic achievement and high self-esteem (LAHS) students' self-esteem were personality and satisfaction with non-academic performance at school and parenting practices. The strongest significant predictor was personality and satisfaction with non-academic performance, which explained 12.6% of the variance. The second most significant predictor was parenting practices, which explained 12.3% of the variance. Together they accounted for 24.9% of the variance in LAHS students' self-esteem scores.

Conclusion

The variable "personality and satisfaction with non-academic performance at schools" was a significant and consistent predictor for the total sample and for both the HALS and LAHS students' self-esteem scores. The personality defined as individual that either depicts

one's uniqueness or one's commonalties with others. These dimensions from a consist and enduring pattern in a manner that determines the behaviors and thoughts of individual and facilitates the accurate prediction of behavior in a wide variety of interpersonal situations (Fehr, 1983). This study examined five dimensions of personality characteristics that were as following: passive, cooperative, self-directed, independent, self-confident. Higher scores of personality/satisfaction with non-academic performance indicated that students were more healthy personal characteristics; lower scores of personality/satisfaction with non-academic performance indicated that students were less healthy personal characteristics. The difference between the three groups is that "personality/satisfaction" explained 13.1% of the variance of the total samples' self-esteem scores and 12.6% of the variance of LAHS students, while it explained only 5.2% of the variance of HALS students' self-esteem scores. In addition, "depression" explained 32.1% of the variance in the total samples' self-esteem scores, and it explained 24.4% of the variance of HALS students' self-esteem scores; it was not a significant predictor of the LAHS students' self-esteem scores. The variable "parenting practices" explained 12.3% of the variance in LAHS students' self-esteem scores, while "parenting practices" only explained 3.4% of the variance in the total students' self-esteem scores; it was not a significant predictor of HALS students' self-esteem scores. HALS students tend to have non-healthy personality characteristics, to be more depressed

and to be less satisfied with their non-academic performance. LAHS students tend to be less depressed, to be more satisfied with their non-academic performance and to have healthier personality characteristics, and to have permissive parenting practices in their homes.

Educational Contribution

The present results suggest that the self-esteem of all students' self-esteem might be facilitated by interventions targeted at both school and family factors. For HALS students, their self-esteem might be related more to their own feelings of depression and to their personality and satisfaction; therefore, they might benefit more from interventions targeted at the individual. For LAHS students, their self-esteem may be related more to parenting practices; this might be a particularly important area for intervention. The connections between self-esteem and significant predictors (i.e., depression, personality and satisfaction with non-academic performance at school, parenting practices, grades, monthly family income, anxiety) are intriguing. Recommendations will be made to educators and administrators in Taiwan to develop programs that indirectly promote student self-esteem by addressing their depression and reinforcing their positive personality characteristics. Schools, teachers, parents, and society should address both self-esteem and its related predictors as integral parts of the students' learning experience. For instance, schools might

provide an "Enrichment Program" that focuses on the affective domains (e.g., self-esteem, family values, career exploration); this program could involve peer tutoring, adult mentors, training in leadership and communication skills, support groups, health promotion, and college experiences for senior high school students. The community could provide a "Youth Community Services Program" which might offer "adult mentors," "leadership training," "parent-child communication training," and "field trips" for low self-esteem and low income students in order to provide role models, to build a positive self-worth, and to bolster high self-esteem. Limitations of this study and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

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