

Academic Performance, Self Esteem and Happiness among Adolescents in Kerala

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ABSTRACT

An average adolescent in Kerala is expected to concentrate on his/her academics and all other key aspects of healthy development like spiritual, psychological and social wellbeing are given scant attention. Middle class parents and teachers often disregard unacceptable behaviors of academically high performing children. Nevertheless as the young person completes education, the world demands competencies not taught in schools and when the critical time of acquisition of these core competencies are long past. In consequence young adults face serious interpersonal difficulties in both personal and professional life. The present study is an attempt to find out whether better academic performance contributes to happiness and increased self esteem among adolescents. A sample of 150 students (75 girls and 75 boys) between 13 to 18 years of age was selected for the study. Self Esteem Rating Scale (SERS), Depression – Happiness Scale (DHS) and recent annual report cards were used to collect quantitative data. The results indicate that there is no significant difference between academically high performing and low performing students in happiness or self esteem i.e. better academic performance does not ensure happiness or positive self esteem. There is positive correlation ($r=0.54^{**}$) between self esteem and happiness. Happier children have better self esteem ($t=5.27^{**}$) than depressed children. The results of this study reveal that happiness and self esteem are independent of academic performance and parents and educators must focus on holistic development not just on scoring well in exams.

Keywords: *Self esteem, happiness, depression.*

Over the years, academic performance has become the singular evaluative factor for an adolescent's achievement and in consequence, they spend most of their time and efforts in academics than any other pursuit. Although education is not the only road to success, parents give more importance to academic excellence because they believe that good academic results can provide career choices, job security as well as high self esteem and lifelong happiness for their children. Academic achievement is defined by Reber (1985) as the

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knowledge attained and skill developed in the school subject, usually designed by test scores. The level of achieving is assessed by success in a particular exam or standardized test. In Kerala society, especially the middle class spend most of their time, effort and money to educate their children and they consider academics of their children as their main focus and defining factor of their family status.

Self esteem is a comprehensive feeling of sense of worth or capability as an individual, or general feelings of self acceptance, kindness and self worth (Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1965). It can be either positive (high self esteem) which leads to greater happiness or negative (low self esteem) which potentially leads to depression (Baumeister et al, 2003). Self esteem can be developed by achieving great successes and can be maintained by avoiding failures. Self-esteem would be expected to be closely linked with a sense of agency or mastery and control of one's environment (Fenichel, 1945; Heider, 1958; White, 1959). According to Bandura (as cited in Malbi and Reasoner, 2000), self esteem is the sense of personal significance and capability that persons correlate with their self-concepts. Self esteem forms early in the course of development, remains fairly constant over time, and is relatively immune to change (Campbell, 1990). Battle (1982) suggested that the concept of self-esteem is a personal, evaluative experience which decides the individual's characteristic insight of sense of worth. High self esteem can begin to develop when an individual's personal and group contributions are recognized and applauded, especially in a multi-culturally diverse world (Redenback, 1991). Whereas low self-esteem can result from various factors, including genetic factors, physical appearance or weight, mental health issues, socioeconomic status, peer pressure or bullying. According to Maslow (1968, 1970), without the fulfillment of the self-esteem need, individuals will be driven to seek it and unable to grow and obtain self-actualization.

The relationships between self-esteem and academic achievement have received much attention (Maruyama, Rubin & Kingsbury, 1981). Some researchers investigated the relationship between self esteem and academic achievement and found that high self esteem facilitates academic achievement. According to Aryana (2010), students with high academic achievement tend to feel more confident in contrast to those who lack confidence achieves less. According to the studies (Pullmann & Allik, 2008) low general self esteem does not necessarily signal a poor academic achievement. Their result shows that low (not high) general self esteem is a significant predictor of superior school performance. Zimmerman (2000) reviewed several studies and concluded that subjective well-being is notably associated with high self-esteem. He further argued that self-esteem contributes to major difference in both happiness and mental well-being.

Happiness is one of the important qualitative sides in human life that every one wishes to find it. According to Kesebir and Diener (2008), happiness is a mental state of well-being described by positive emotions ranging from contentment to profound delight. Happiness could be better understood in relation to frequent and repeated positive effect, elevated life satisfaction and uncommon negative effect, which are three basic elements of subjective

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well-being (Diener, 1984; 1994). Happiness motivates social activities, strengthens human relations, renovates the sense of hope, helps to let go worries & stress, increase wellbeing and gives courage to win anxiety causing competitions. Wilson (1967) explored different demographic characteristics of happiness. According to him, a happy individual is one who is youthful, vigorous, knowledgeable, productive, extroverted, hopeful, religious, and have high self-esteem. These attitudes can be self-fulfilling, leading happy people to experience more positive events (e.g., Magnus et al., 1993; Headey and Wearing, 1989) and more fulfilling social relationships, which can further enhance well-being. According to Carl Jung (1987), five factors that lead to happiness are good physical and mental health, good personal and social relationships, the faculty for perceiving beauty in art and nature, reasonable standards of living and satisfactory work, a philosophic or religious point of view capable of coping successfully with the vicissitudes of life. Jung also added, "All factors which are generally assumed to make for happiness can, under certain circumstances, produce the contrary. No matter how ideal your situation may be, it does not necessarily guarantee happiness."

Adolescence has been thought of as a period of "storm and stress"- a time of heightened emotional tension resulting from the physical and glandular changes associated with the developmental stage (Stanley Hall, 1989). If adolescents are realistic about the degree of acceptance they can achieve, and are satisfied with the people who accept & show affection to them their chances for happiness are greatly increased. Besides problems in academics, young people face issues that relate to the 'developmental tasks' of adolescence, which revolve around identity, independence, love, sex & unwanted teenage pregnancies, money, alcohol & various other drug misuses, suicide, cyber bullying, unhealthy peer relationships etc. Some adolescents have the resilience to overcome these struggles, while others simply get stuck.

Positive mental health among adolescents is characterized by the achievement of developmental and emotional milestones, healthy social development, and effective coping skills; such that mentally healthy children have a positive quality of life and can function well at home, in school, and in their communities.

Need and Significance of the Study

An average middle class Keralite, spends much of their time, money and other resources to educate and promote career prospects and future happiness of their children. The society, dominated by nuclear families, is becoming more and more child-centric, parents are willing to satisfy all the needs of their children in order to see their children competent as well as happy, even if the needs are unaffordable according to family's financial status. Although today's children enjoy all sorts of materialistic pleasures, the current statistical records of suicide, substance abuse, early initiation of sexual activities and other socially unacceptable, self harming and dangerous behaviors among teens is seen to increase tremendously indicating a poor mental health. It is believed that while society focus on the material aspects like academics and physical development they pay scant attention to emotional and mental health of the children. If the results indicate poor self esteem and happiness among the

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sample it can provide opportunities for parents, school authorities and society as a whole to take remedial steps and assists the younger generation to adapt to the challenges of life.

Aim

The study aims to examine whether there is any relationship between academic performance, self esteem and happiness among adolescents.

Objectives

1. To assess the level of self esteem and happiness among adolescents of Kerala
2. To check if there is any relationship between academic achievement, self esteem and happiness.
3. To find out if high academic performance contributes to general happiness and positive self esteem of adolescents.

Hypothesis

1. There will be no significant correlation between self esteem & happiness.
2. There will be no significant difference in happiness between academically high performing & low performing adolescents.
3. There will no significant difference in self esteem between academically high performing & low performing adolescents.
4. The percentage of students with positive self esteem and happiness will be low.

METHODOLOGY

Method outlines the way the research problem has been formulated and the procedures adopted to test the stated hypothesis. The sample consisted of 150 students (75 girls and 75 boys) between 13 to 18 years of age was selected randomly from Ernakulum district of Kerala. Self esteem was measured using Self Esteem Rating Scale (SERS) – developed by Nugent, W.R, & Thomas, J.W. The SERS has excellent internal consistency with an alpha of 0.97%. The SERS has good construct and good content validity. Happiness was measured using Depression-Happiness Scale (DHS) – developed by Joseph, S, & Lewis C.A. The internal consistency of the DHS is very good with an alpha of 0.88. The DHS has very good concurrent validity correlating positively with the Oxford Happiness Inventory, and negatively with the Beck Depression Inventory. Both tests were found to be valid in Kerala context.

Academic performance of students were assessed by grouping them into academically high performing (80% of marks and above) & low performing (below 79 % and below) based on their most recent annual reports. The tests were administered to groups of 10 adolescents after explaining the purpose of the study and seeking consent. The obtained data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, t test and correlations. The results are discussed in the following session.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The investigators have attempted study academic performance, positive self esteem and happiness among adolescents through the present study. The sample consisted of 150 adolescents (75 girls & 75 boys) selected randomly from various parts of Ernakulam district. Self esteem was measured using Self Esteem Rating Scale (SERS) and happiness was measured using Depression-Happiness Scale (DHS). Descriptive statistics, percentages, t test and correlations were used to analyze the data.

Spearman correlation coefficient was used to find the correlation between self esteem and happiness. The results given in table 1 indicates that there is positive correlation ($r=0.54$, $p<0.01$) between self esteem and happiness. Thus hypothesis 1 is rejected. The study clearly signifies the influence that self esteem has upon the happiness.

Table 1: Relationship between Self esteem and Happiness of adolescents.

| Variables | | Depression / Happiness |
|-------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Self Esteem | Pearson Correlation | 0.540** |
| | N | 150 |

** Significant at 0.01 level

This result is consistent with earlier research findings (Malekiha and Abedi, 2012; Houser, 2001; Diener, 2000; Visser, 2000; Sheldon and Sprague, 1997; Myers, 1992 & Argyle and Crossland, 1987) which reported that self-esteem is positively correlated with individual’s self-reported happiness. According to Myers (1992), life satisfaction begins with self satisfaction. A positive view of self may color our view of life in general. Even though correlation studies do not tell us about the cause and effect, it is hard to imagine a happy and satisfying life without a strong measure of self acceptance, self respect and positive self regard.

High academic performance of children is associated with greater parental approval, social acceptance and subjective experience of happiness. The present study checked this assertion by comparing the happiness of high performing and low performing adolescents. Based on results given in table 2 there is no significant difference in happiness between academically high achieving and low achieving adolescents. Thus hypothesis 2 is accepted.

Table 2: Happiness of academically high performing and low performing adolescents

| Variable | Academic Performance(marks) | N | Mean | S D | t |
|-----------|-----------------------------|----|-------|--------|------|
| Happiness | 80% or above | 83 | 48.73 | 11.524 | 0.77 |
| | below 80% | 67 | 47.37 | 10.084 | |

The above result goes along with the earlier research (Huebner & Alderman, 1993; Huebner, 1991) which failed to find a significant association between well-being and academic performance. This may be because adolescents living in an increasingly consumerist culture find greater happiness in possessing materialistic goods as they find acquisition of certain gadgets, even being in romantic relationships as prime indicator of success and key to

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happiness. Thus happiness is probably associated with social, emotional and interpersonal factors than academic performance.

Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference in self esteem between academically high performing and low performing adolescents. Based on the table, hypothesis 3 is accepted. This result go along with the studies of Pullmann & Allik (2008) in which they cited that “there are two lines of explanation why low general self-esteem does not necessarily signal a poor academic performance and these two lines need not be incompatible with each other. (1) It is possible that cognitively better developed and academically successful students have a more critical outlook on themselves. (2) Students with more modest academic abilities compensate their academic deficiency by elevating their general affect by other pursuits”.

Table 3: Self esteem of academically high performing and low performing adolescents.

| Variable | Academic Performance (marks) | N | Mean | SD | t |
|-------------|------------------------------|----|-------|--------|------|
| Self Esteem | 80% or above | 83 | 41.72 | 30.367 | 1.54 |
| | below 80% | 67 | 33.64 | 33.033 | |

Self esteem or a feeling of self worth is expected to improve with achievements including academic performance. But the results of this study indicate otherwise. The participants of this study are adolescents who are yet to establish their academic credibility so academic performance by itself may not affect their self esteem. The measure used in this study does not specifically assess academic self esteem, which could have given a different result.

From the percentage analysis (Table 4) done on the sample it was evident that, 87% of the students have positive self esteem which shows that they have a stable positive opinion about themselves. When their happiness levels were analyzed, 55% of the students appeared more happy showing that though temporary factors affect them they could view the problems in a positive angle helping them to make better adjustment to the daily life issues. Based on the results hypothesis 4 is rejected.

Table 4: Percentage of students who are more happy, more depressed, with positive self esteem and negative self esteem.

| Variables | | N | Percentage |
|-------------|----------------------|-----|------------|
| Happiness | More happy | 83 | 55 |
| | More depressed | 67 | 46 |
| Self esteem | Positive Self esteem | 130 | 87 |
| | Negative self esteem | 20 | 13 |

Self esteem and happiness are two important indicators of psychological well being. Happiness is more of a subjective emotion which is highly influenced by everyday experiences while self esteem is a stable personality dimension. This may be because these adolescents receive more academic, social and emotional opportunities to assess their personal worth and elders both parents and teachers provide ample opportunities and for their holistic development. High percentage of people with positive self esteem & happiness

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indicate that adolescents have better mental health. Nuclear family system and child centric parenting as well as educational system acts as facilitating conditions for their positive mental health.

There also are a sizable percentage of more depressed adolescents. Studies have indicated that happier people experience more positive outcomes in life (Magnus et al., 1993). Given the number of suicides, people with substance addiction especially among the younger population in Kerala the number of more depressed adolescents is a cause of concern. There is a lack of understanding that adolescents need diverse opportunities to be in a positive state of affect especially considering the volatile emotionality associated with their developmental stage. Youth as a whole must be exposed to situations that bring out positive and finer emotions including social service, helping in caring of the aged, sick and the needy. This would help them to be more spiritually oriented, emotionally resilient and adopt a proactive attitude to life.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study indicate that there is no significant difference in self esteem and happiness of academically high achieving & low achieving children. It is also found that happier children have better self esteem than depressed children. The study found that greater percentage of adolescents in Kerala have positive self esteem and are happier than depressed irrespective of their academic performance. The results point to positive mental health of adolescents in Kerala.

The outcomes of this study signify that greater academic achievement by itself may not make adolescents happier and/ or help to improve self esteem. Self esteem and happiness probably depends more on positive interpersonal relationships and pro social activities that gain approval and personal satisfaction than a purely materialistic aspect like marks. The finding that a considerable percentage of adolescents are more depressed advocates the need to look for and incorporate social service activities within and outside the academic setting. Such activities can bring positive changes in mental health and wellbeing of the future generations.

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