

Does the way one feels about relationships matter in academic situations? A study of the role of social self-concept on academic achievement of adolescents in Zimbabwe secondary schools: A qualitative study

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Abstract: Low academic achievement continues to be a challenge for the education system and society as a whole. A search for causes of low academic achievement and possible solutions remains top priority for institutions, educators, leaders and policy makers. The study sought to investigate the role of learner social self-concept on academic achievement of adolescents in secondary schools in selected areas of Zimbabwe. A qualitative methodology using focus group interviews was adopted to obtain detailed information about how learners felt about their social relationships with significant others including parents, educators and peers, and their effect on academic performance. High and low performing learners from urban and rural secondary schools were involved. Results have shown that positive social relationships were important for learning and achievement and that gender was only important for stereotyping subject choice but not overall performance. In view of the research results it is important that educators, parents, peers work collaboratively to maintain positive relations of all the learners to promote better achievement..

Keywords: social self-concept, achievement, peers, gender, educator

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The proportion of successful 'O' level candidates who pass in five or more subjects in secondary schools has dropped significantly from 63 to 19.5 percent between 1980 and 2011. The high failure rate is a concern for parents, educators, educationists and the learners. Low pass rates have been attributed to poor human and material resources. It is therefore, important that further research be undertaken to find out more on the issue of under-achievement and factors related to this.

There appears to be an increasing awareness that individual differences in Intelligence (IQ) alone can no longer account for all, or even the majority of differences in learners' scholastic achievement. For example, correlations between intelligence and academic achievement declined from $r=0.70$ in elementary school, to $r=0.50$ in secondary school. Furthermore, such results have led to the conclusion that non-ability factors such as personality, self-efficacy beliefs and motivational variables become more important in distinguishing between the better and worse learners [1-2]. Recent evidence supports the notion that personality traits were good predictors of academic achievement [1-2, 3]. Personality factor, social *self-concept* and its influence with academic achievement needed further investigation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social self-concept and academic achievement

Social relationships can influence the way persons view themselves in learning and other situations. The root of self-concept lies in family experiences [4]. For example, learners who became discouraged in the face of social challenges such as bullying and dislike tended to have low self-worth and expectations of future success leading to under-achievement[5-6]. Support, favourable relationships and feedback for one's academic accomplishments by parents, educators and friends contributed towards positive academic self-concept leading to greater motivation and higher scholastic performance [4, 7]. The value placed on academic achievement by parents correlated significantly with children's perception of their competencies and academic achievement[8-10].

Research reported boys as having better social self-concepts than girls [4] and other studies found the reverse [11-12].

School settings that emphasized mastery, understanding, improving skills and knowledge tended to stimulate positive motivation and learning patterns. On the other hand, school environments that focused on demonstrating high ability and competition for grades only helped to increase performance of few learners

while the majority experienced diminished motivation and performance[13]. Thus, the social environment may have an influence on learners' level of school engagement and outcomes. It is important that the relationship between social self-concept and academic achievement be investigated further.

The next section looks at the relationship between parental acceptance and rejection of the learner and academic achievement.

Parental acceptance and rejection of the learner and academic achievement

According to Brookover et al learners whose parents are involved and supportive, and who set reasonable and reachable expectations have positive social self-concepts[14]. They also perform better in school than their counterparts whose parents are less involved, less supportive and who set expectations that are either too high or too low. Involvement and being supportive are regarded as proxies for learner acceptance by parents while less involvement and less support were symbolic of rejection. Looking at this analogy it would appear that acceptance is associated with positive achievement while rejection is associated with failure. Educators play a crucial role in the education of learners. This will be discussed in the next section.

Educators, learner social self-concept and academic achievement

According to Babad [15] the educator's affective behaviour, especially towards low and high achievers, and the learners' subsequent reactions to it, are critical in shaping one's social self-concept. He reports that educators often provide learning support and less pressure to achieve to low achievers, and a warmer emotional climate and more positive affect to high achievers. Generally, educators have been known to transmit more negative affects to lower achievers. Consequently, low achievers have tended to decline in their academic performance while the high achievers excel.

Babad reports of educators who tend to favour girls who are academically good though they may not be the best[15]. On the other hand, other learners tend to keep a social distance from the educator's favourites and often display angry reactions towards such educators. However, if the learners who are the educators' favourites are already popular with other learners, there will be no negative reactions towards them. Similarly, an educator who loves learners and appreciates their effort and performance is likely to encourage positive behaviour and enhance their abilities. On the other hand, detachment tends to weaken social bonds leading to poor academic performance. Thus, the educator's different affective behaviours towards learners or treatment of the learners

can raise or lower their social self-concept and subsequently their academic achievement in school. In the following section the role of peer acceptance and rejection in academic achievement will be illustrated.

Peer acceptance, peer rejection and academic achievement

According to Hunt adolescents tend to spend more time with peers than with their parents. Consequently, satisfaction with peer relationships leads to the development of a positive social self-concept[. She goes on to say that adolescents who are accepted by their peers tend to experience positive self-concepts and higher academic achievement. On the other hand, those less accepted experience both social and academic problems. For the adolescents, conformity with peer norms is a critical factor. For example, if peers do not value academic achievement, any member of their group who becomes academically successful is rejected while the desire to retain group membership often leads to the decline in general cognitive self-concept, and low academic achievement. The opposite is likely to be true[17].

Clark underscores the same point when he describes friendship as a cultural institution that transmits knowledge and offers support. He points out the importance of peer relationships to the educational progress of Afro-American adolescents. Trusty *et al* reiterates that peer-related social self-concepts or peer acceptance are more highly associated with academic achievement than are educator-school related social self-concepts. In a study involving Afro-American adolescents, Trusty *et al* came to the conclusion that social self-concept accounted for a significant amount of variability in academic achievement after controlling for socio-economic status[18].

However, Marchant in a study of Afro-American elementary school learners, reports a negative relationship between social self-concept and academic achievement. This has been explained by the fact that achievement among the Afro-American learners was not consistent with their racial and cultural goals and that a negative social stigma was attached to achievement. Consequently, lower achievement was generally common among the Afro-American adolescents. The view is also supported by Fordman and Ogbu [18].

According to Park [19] researchers have found a link between social skills and academic achievement or performance. For example, stable peer acceptance during the early school years tends to protect learners from early academic difficulties while peer rejection precedes early academic difficulties. Rejected learners were also associated with low socio-economic status and that they were less academically skilled than accepted learners [10].

Furthermore, Buhs and Ladd[9] reported that rejected learners were more likely to experience negative peer treatment, participate less in the classroom, express the desire to avoid school and perform less well on achievement measures.

Rotherham, Yarworth and Gauthier[20] report of learners who are assertive and others who give in too easily to others. They found out that learners who are assertive and willing to take interpersonal risks are more likely to have positive social self-concepts than those who were less assertive and took fewer risks. Learners who have positive social self-concepts are generally bolder and more confident in their interpersonal relationships. They foster positive feelings about themselves in academic situations which help them to perform better academically. Those who are less confident tend to give up quickly when their peers are performing better than themselves. As a result learners with positive social self-concepts were capable of working independently on tasks because they are more confident of their abilities while lower self-concept learners who lack confidence require more help and supervision and are often restless when doing school work. The popularity of the learner will be examined in relation to academic achievement in the following section.

Popularity, social self-concept and academic achievement

According to Ladd [21] learners who have a large number of classroom friends at the time they enter school have more favourable perceptions of the school. Learners maintain such friendships and grow to like their school more as the year progresses. He reports that making new friends was positively associated with school performance gains. On the other hand, early peer rejection tends to lead to less favourable perceptions of the school, higher levels of school avoidance and lower academic performance.

According to Hamachek[20], learners with positive social self-concepts tend to be more popular and enjoy better interpersonal relationships than learners with lower social self-concepts. Popularity in this context is regarded as a reflection of the learner's success in developing interpersonal relationships, and self-confidence which is often accompanied by general academic and subject competence.

Huitt [16] posits that satisfaction with peer relationships is important in the development of a positive social self-concept and higher academic achievement. However, not all learners who display self-confidence and popularity among peers are successful academically. Negative indicators such as quietness, shyness, hesitance and lack of popularity, minimal involvement in class may be a preferred life-

style if it is accompanied by academic success. However, when such characteristics are accompanied by unhappiness and fear, failure may be the outcome[20]. Owing to their confidence, learners with positive social self-concepts often prefer to work on their own while those with low social self-concepts seek assistance from others.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study has important implications for educators, parents, policy makers, school managers and educational psychologists. The study highlights the role of personality factor in learning and academic achievement. It will enhance educators' understanding of how learners experience learning tasks, classroom and school environments and the consequences on academic achievement. It will help school authorities formulate policies that seek to improve learners' engagement in the school leading to better performance. The study will help underscore the importance of family, peers, educators, learners, administrators and policy makers working in partnership to promote learners' education through supportive attitudes, feedback, establishing and maintaining supportive home and learning environments. The study will create awareness among educators that improving academic skills alone is not enough to improve performance in school but social relationships too. Trainers of educators may need to incorporate 'self-concept development' as part of their curriculum in order to equip educators with skills to work with learners more effectively. Finally, the study will open more opportunities for research on self-concept and academic achievement for different subjects and school populations. Experimental studies can be carried out overall and in individual subjects to establish causal relationship between social self-concept and academic achievement.

In view of the above background, rationale and literature review, the study investigated *the role of learner social self-concept on academic achievement of adolescents in Zimbabwe secondary schools*. It was predicted that social self-concept or social relationships had a role to play in academic achievement and that variables such as gender mediated in social self-concept and academic achievement.

METHODOLOGY

Focus group interviews

Under the qualitative research design, the researcher employed the focus group interview. Focus group interview was a preferred strategy for obtaining a better understanding of a problem a problem by interviewing a purposefully sampled group instead of individuals. It was a useful approach for exploring attitudes, perceptions, feelings and ideas of a group while focusing on non-sensitive and non-controversial topics. This helped improve the validity and usefulness

of the study findings. Focus group interviews helped to reveal consensus views by generating richer responses by allowing participants to challenge one another's views.

The discussion centred on the social self-concepts to elicit the learners' feelings and experiences in relation to their academic achievement. Interviews were conducted in groups of eight to ten male and female learners' at each of the selected centres. Centres chosen were two non-government boarding schools in rural areas, two government rural schools, and three urban Government schools. Above average and below average learners participated in the focus group interviews. Levels of performance were determined from mid-year test scores.

The researcher asked both volunteers and non-volunteers to give their views in order to avoid biased responses from extroverts.

The interviews were tape recorded. The researcher also took down notes during the interviews. In addition to tape-recording, the researcher also observed participants' gestures, facial expressions, intonation and other non-verbal responses to the speaker. These further helped interpretation of the interview responses. For the group, the interviewer took note of consensus on key points, inconveniences and clues from the answers. An interview guide helped the groups and the interviewer to focus discussions on the study problem (self-concept and academic achievement) without restricting free expression.

Interview guide

Questions asked included:

- a) How would do you describe your relationship with the head of school, educators, parents and peers? How does your relationship with these affect your performance in school? (The aim of the question was to solicit information about educator, parental, peer support or rejection and how this influenced academic achievement. The question also sought information about popularity of the school as well.)
- b) There is a general belief among people that boys performed better than girls overall and in individual subjects. Do you think that it is possible for boys to take subjects traditionally meant for girls or vice versa? Girls are said to be generally afraid of mathematics. What are your views about these issues? (The questions sought to elicit information about gender differences in academic performance and perceptions about specific subjects.)
- c) How do you rate your performance in this school/class generally? What are your impressions about the school with regard to its

ability to promote academic achievement for learners? (The questions sought to elicit information about the school's popularity with the learners and how this influenced their academic achievement.)

- d) Probes were also used to obtain more complete data about the relationship between social self-concepts and academic achievement of the learners. The effectiveness of interviewing depended on efficient probing and sequencing of questions.

Qualitative data analysis

Thematic data analysis for the current study involved a systematic process of selecting, categorising, comparing, synthesising and interpreting data in order to provide explanations of phenomena of interest, in this case, the social self-concept and academic achievement. In the current study data analysis focused on the social self-concepts and its role in academic achievement.

The structure of the interview guide automatically helped in the categorisation of interview data into the social self-concept themes of interest. Additional data was coded in the text and synthesised into relevant categories for comparison and contrast with the academic achievement in order to establish patterns or relationships. Data analysis was done in accordance with the research questions and any data that emerged during the interview. Data analysis produced results reflecting the social self-concepts of learners of different categories by level of ability and gender.

Ethical Measures

The study addressed ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, violation of privacy, protection of the participants, co-operation with collaborators, release or publication of findings and restoration of subjects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Focus group interviews were held with groups of between eight and ten learners in four government and two non-government schools in urban and rural areas. Interviews focused on the learners' social self-concepts and their role on academic achievement. The findings were as follows:

Social self- concept and academic achievement

From the responses it emerged that there were positive and negative factors that influenced the learners' social self-concepts and consequently academic achievement. Social self-concept was reported as influencing academic achievement through the type of relationship, nature of interactions with significant others and the learners' response as

presented in the following sections confirming earlier research by Kaur [4].

Support, encouragement and love by significant others

From the responses it emerged that parental, educator, peer support and encouragement were key to raising or lowering learner social self-concept and academic achievement. Support and encouragement from, and relationship with educators in particular, were described as critical for the learners' success. The influence was regarded as reciprocal. For example, support, encouragement and love from significant others (used as proxies for acceptance) tended to raise the social self-concept and encouraged learners to work hard in order to succeed academically. Results were in agreement with Hamachek[20]. Success in school raised acceptance of the learners' behaviour and accomplishments even more by significant others in academic situations. This was in agreement with literature[15,9, 20, 7]. The following are some of the comments made by learners which emphasised the importance of parents, educators and peers for learning and academic achievement. Asked how their relationship with parents affected their performance in school, low achievers responded thus:

"Look at my parents, they encouraged my brother to do everything and he is intelligent, so I also want to be encouraged by my parents. I also want my parents to like me the way they like my brother so that I can set my goals high and achieve them so that my parents will learn to like me the way they like my brother."

The response above showed that adolescents needed encouragement and to be liked by parents. They argued that such behaviour encouraged them to work hard as well as setting high goals which would lead parents to like them even more. Thus encouraging behaviour was viewed as having a positive influence on aspirations and future performance in school hence such behaviour was to be encouraged in every parent.

Asked how relationship with educators influenced their performance in school, both low and high achievers responded as follows;

"... relationship with educators contributed a lot to academic work... if educators were supportive and they liked us, definitely academic performance will be high. Children sent to high performing schools with high pass rates do better because they were encouraged by the educators to work hard."

Thus support provided by educators was regarded as contributing to higher academic performance. Such behavior should be encouraged as much as possible for more conducive learning environment. Results were in accordance with findings by Pettit [10].

Asked how their relationship with peers influenced their performance in school the learners responded;

Peers contribute a lot to my academic work because if they like me, they would definitely be supportive and my academic work would be high."

These comments emphasised the reciprocal nature of the social self-concept and reinforcement effect of encouragement leading to success and more success and were in agreement [18]. However, a positive social self-concept could under certain circumstances, lead to failure. This happens when learners are overwhelmed by parental material support. Learners tend to become complacent in school and fail. For example, *"If parents have a lot of money, their children may not be interested in education because they know that even if they fail, they will get support from their parents."*

Academic achievement and gender

Asked whether boys performed better than girls, responses appeared to indicate that gender stereotyping was reported as an important factor influencing the performance of girls overall and in specific subjects. The label one gets from society, significant others, and their expectations were likely to influence performance positively or negatively. Boys and girls considered themselves as equally competent academically but different in subjects of interest and strength. Boys were reported as more competent in the sciences and physically challenging subjects while girls did better in arts and traditionally feminine subjects like fashion and fabrics in accordance with literature[19]. In addition, girls attributed their relatively poor performance in science subjects to the lack of role models in the scientific field and inferior label placed on them by society. Boys on the other hand conceded to the superiority of girls in humanities subjects. Comments made included:

"I think women were not given a chance because long ago it used to be men always put in front of women so women did not get a chance to prove to them what they could do. We (boys and girls) think we are the same academically, but when it comes to physical science, technical subjects and mathematics boys are better while girls are better and more interested in fashion, accounts, English and Shona."

Social relations and interactions with parents, educators and peers were reported to be important influences on the academic performance of adolescent learners in the sample considered.

Positive influences on social self-concept and academic achievement

Educators, social self-concept and academic achievement

Respondents in urban and rural areas, government and non-government schools were unanimous on the important role educators played in influencing learners' social self-concept and their academic achievement as documented in literature[15]. Supportive behaviour such as encouragement and warm relations in academic situations (indicators of acceptance) by educators towards the learners had a positive effect on the learners' social self-concept and academic achievement.

" My relationship with educators contributed a lot to my academic work because if educators were supportive and they liked me, definitely my academic performance would be high;" "Children sent to high performing schools with high pass rates did better because they were encouraged by the educators to work hard."

The ideas quoted above underline the crucial role the educator played in self-concept building for better academic achievement[15,7].

Peer, social self-concept and academic achievement

Peer support and collaboration raised the learners' social self-concept and academic achievement. Respondents singled out classes of high performers where they hoped to be exposed to healthy competition. Slower learners expected to receive assistance with their work from their more able counterparts. Others expressed the view that there would be an exchange of information in agreement with literature[16,19].

"Peers contributed a lot to my academic work because if they liked me, they would definitely be supportive and my academic work would be high;" "Some learners understood their friends much better than their educators when concepts were explained."

Relationships with members of the opposite sex

Boy-girl relationships were described as responsible for raising the social self-concept and academic achievement through inspiration, support, and encouragement of each other. It was stated that such relationships enabled the sharing of ideas on academic issues. For example,

"Having a girlfriend need not put you into problems because the same girl might help you

in solving academic problems, say in mathematics which you may not be able to solve on your own;" "...you think if I fail would Rudo (Girlfriend) like me, so you tend to study more so that you can achieve your goal and maintain the relationship;" "A girlfriend was someone you could share ideas with and do class work with."

Others also stated that such relationships would not have a negative effect on academic achievement as long as one approached schoolwork seriously with maturity and managed time well:

"What matters was the seriousness of the learners, ability to balance schoolwork with the relationship and your maturity. I believe you would succeed," one respondent said.

This was an example of peer support reported Trusty *et al* [18]. There were however, challenges that affected social self-concept and academic achievement negatively.

Rejection by parents

Lack of parental support, encouragement and love lowered social self-concept and academic achievement: *"I want to be encouraged by my parents, and I also want my parents to like me so that I may be able to achieve my goals;"* was a comment made.

Some stated that comparison with siblings lowered their social self-concepts and academic achievement. For example,

"My parents contributed a lot to my being intelligent because if they compared me with my elder sister and if she was more intelligent than me then obviously I was going to be shun and put down and would not try my best because I know that she was always going to be better than me."

The statement illustrated the sentiments and the view was in agreement with an earlier study[9,20].

Rejection by educators

Educator behaviours such as dislike of the learners, lack of encouragement, and instilling fear in learners tended to lower their social self-concepts. This often led to constrained communication between the learners and the educators thereby lowering level of participation in class and learning activities and achievement as a whole. For example:

"There are some subjects I do not participate in and do not perform well in because of the responses given to my contributions by educators in the subject." "If educators do not

like me most probably they will not be supportive of my work so I do not think my performance can be that high."

There are times when learners do not like some educators as well. Hostility develops and the social self-concept is lowered with a subsequent decline in academic achievement. Results supported an earlier study by Kaur[4] and Hay *et al* [5]. Learners expressed the following sentiments about their relationship with educators that could affect social self-concept and academic achievement as well.

"There are some educators whom you dislike, so sometimes they may brutalise you and it may end up in abuse." "If you and the educator do not go along well, the educator, when marking your books/tests he/she may be a bit hard on you. So I think there must be communication;" "Some educators were fierce to ask questions so when I want to ask questions I become afraid to ask and just keep quiet."

From the above it is clear that, it is all about relations that can raise or lower the social self-concept[10].

Peers

Negative comments given by other learners such as accusations of cheating and mockery to answers given in response to the educators' questions tended to lower social self-concept among the learners and their academic achievement negatively. Such behaviour discouraged learning and participation in class, leading to lower academic achievement. Results supported Trusty *et al* [18]. For example,

" There are some subjects I do not participate in and do not perform well in because of the responses other learners give to the contributions I make in the subject;" " Sometimes you can be accused of cheating when you did not."

Others went on to say, that lack of warm relationships among classmates led to lower academic achievement due to lack of collaboration [9]. For example,

"In this class, we are not friendly to each other, we cannot even get together to work in other subjects, so our relationship with other learners can affect our ability in school;" is one comment that was made. Another learner remarked: "Our relationship with other learners will also affect our learning because if we do not communicate well or we mock each other, we will not pass our examinations."

Discouragement, lack of friendship and collaboration were indicators of rejection. Results supported literature on peer acceptance and rejection[18].

CONCLUSION

From the discussion presented, it would appear that relationships with significant others were important influences on social self-concept and subsequently academic achievement. Parental support, acceptance and rejection had some influence on how learners performed in school, better if positive and worse if negative. Similarly, parents who gave feedback to their children on school work tended to raise learner motivation to succeed. The same applied to peer behaviour and interaction with other learners. Learners who were popular and maintained good relations with peers tended to be more confident and capable of working independently on tasks. The educator's behaviour and social interaction with learners promoted better achievement if it was positive. Thus, the social relationships a learner experienced at home, school and with peers might influence a learner's social self-concept and academic achievement in school. It is recommended that that parents, peers and educators work collaboratively to promote and maintain sound relationships for better learning experiences and academic achievement of adolescent learners. Further research can be carried out to establish the role of peer, parental, teacher influence using a quantitative study with a larger sample and in different school settings and geographical areas.

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