

Self-Esteem and Academic Streaming in Hong Kong

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AN IMPORTANT DECISION of education policymakers everywhere is whether to group pupils in homogeneous or heterogeneous ability streams, either at the class or school level. In meta-analysis of research assessing the impact of ability grouping on student self-esteem, Kulik (1985) concluded that when placed in classes streamed for ability rather than in unstreamed classes, high-ability children tend to have lower self-esteem, but low-ability children tend to have higher self-esteem. A more recent review by Marsh (1989) supported this conclusion. Marsh interpreted such findings in terms of the “big fish little pond” (BFLP) effect: An individual’s self-esteem is strongly influenced by the group that individual uses as a reference.

In a high-ability class, pupils may compare themselves primarily with other members of that class and thus view their own academic competence less highly than they would if they were in a class with students of varying ability levels. The opposite effect can occur for a low-ability child in a class with other low-ability children. Although the impact is likely to be strongest for academic self-esteem, there may be residual effects on other components of the self as well as on general self-esteem. Marsh (1989) pointed out that there may be individual differences in the BFLP effect that have been studied little to date. Also, as yet, the phenomenon has been demonstrated only in research with North American, western European, and Australian participants, whose self-concepts would tend to be primarily individualistic in nature and who would tend to give higher priority to the attainment of personal goals (Triandis, 1989). It has still to be shown that the same effect will occur in collectivistic cultures where the emphasis is relatively more on group than on individual success, and therefore the effects of individual comparisons may be less salient to self-concept.

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Our purpose in the present research was to investigate the relationship between ability grouping and self-esteem among students in secondary schools in Hong Kong, a relatively collectivist society. Gender differences in this relationship were also investigated.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 132 male and 148 female 1st-year secondary school students (11–12 years of age). Hong Kong has a system of ability grouping, in which the majority of secondary schools are assigned students of similar ability as determined by standardized aptitude and attainment tests in the final year of primary school. Each student is classified into one of five ability bands: Band 1 includes the top 20% of the Hong Kong student cohort, Band 2 the next highest 20%, and so forth. The students are then assigned to the secondary school corresponding to their ability band closest to their home. The ability group of each school is widely known by the teachers, students, and parents. To control socioeconomic factors, we drew the sample in this study from Band 2, 3, and 5 coeducational schools in similar areas of Hong Kong.

Instrument

A Chinese translation of the Self-Description Questionnaire 1 (SDQ 1; Marsh, 1989) was used to assess self-esteem. The SDQ 1 is based on a hierarchical, multifaceted model of self and consists of 76 items, each answered on 5 point scales (*false* = 1, *true* = 5) tapping seven dimensions of self and general self-concept. This questionnaire has been widely used and has been shown to have strong psychometric properties in terms of internal consistency and factor structure in Western and non-Western countries, including Hong Kong and China (Watkins & Dong, 1994).

Results

We analyzed the responses by Band \times Gender analysis of variance. Main effects significant at the 0.1 level were found for band on the Physical Abilities scale, $F(2, 274) = 8.24$, and for gender on the Physical Abilities and Mathematics scales, $F(1, 274) = 17.36$ and 8.54, respectively. Significant $p < .01$ interaction effects were found also for the Physical Abilities and Reading scales, $F(2, 274) = 16.26$ and 6.71, respectively.

The Band 3 participants, particularly the boys, reported the highest physical ability and reading self-esteem. The boys also reported the highest mathematics self-esteem, except in the Band 5 classes (but the latter interaction effect did not reach the required significance level).

Discussion

These results indicate that some aspects of self-esteem may differ according to ability grouping in the non-Western society of Hong Kong. However, there was only partial support for the BFLP effect: The "average" Band 3 participants reported the highest overall self-esteem in the areas of reading and, not so surprisingly, physical abilities. Also, there is some indication that the effects of ability grouping may be different for boys and girls.

The findings of this study must be treated with caution. They are based on only three schools of pupils with different academic abilities; thus, the differences obtained may be attributable to the learning environments of the schools rather than to the policy of ability grouping. However, the schools were chosen to be representative of their bands, and socioeconomic status was controlled. The results do indicate that the effects of ability grouping on self-concept may not be linear and may show gender differences when a range of ability groups is considered.

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