

The Impact of Academic Failure on the Self-Concept of Elementary Grade Students

Bushra Iqbal Chohan^{*}

Abstract

Self-concept has gained significant position in educational theories. The self-concept is said to be a set of planned self-attitudes that are relatively established and "characteristic" of an individual (Demo, 1992, p.303). In the present study, the impact of academic failure on the self-concept of the students was examined. The students of grade four in public primary schools (N=42) of Rawalpindi city were taken as study sample. Quantitative data were collected in two-phase panel study, i.e. at the beginning of the last term of preceding academic session and at the start of successive academic year. The self-concept of the students (N=238) was measured through Urdu translation of Beck Youth Inventory for Self-Concept of Children (BSCI-Y). The overall findings of the study revealed that the impact of academic failure on the self-concept of the students may be considerably negative. The researcher recommended on the basis of the findings of the study that, while designing teacher training programs, the practical aspects of child psychology alone with theoretical considerations ought to be built up, as depicted in the conclusion of the present study. If the practical aspects of child behavior are incorporated into the teacher training programs, they may become more viable, relevant and acceptable for the teachers.

Keywords: Self-concept, success, failure, public schools

^{*}Principal, Government Degree College for Women, Zafar-ul-Haq Road Rawalpindi.
Email: bushrachohan@hotmail.com

Introduction

The “self” is thought to be a fundamental idea in the field of personality psychology. Generally, it is used as I and Me. William James (1890 as cited in Funder, 2007) has explained a significant division between these two aspects. The self ‘I’ as an agent, conducts basic functions, as self regulation, self evaluation etc. “me” as an object, represented in self concepts, in how we see ourselves. During the course of development, “the child attains gradually more rich concept of himself or herself as an active agent, “I” separate from other people and objects, and “me” that has defining features and qualities reflected in multiple self-concepts” (Mischel, Shoda, & Smith, 2004, p.293).

Quite a large number of research studies indicated that school failure is a major cause of low self-concept[†] in students. School failure damages their self-image and they often start dislike themselves. Trethewey (1999) affirmed that “being rated as “unfit for promotion” at the end of a year frequently undermined a child’s self-respect and confidence” (p.280). Likewise, McMartin (1995) endorsed that “failure in school plays a significant role in forming a negative self-image, especially when the child’s self concept is negative to begin with” (p.68). Similarly, Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, and Rosenberg (1995) stated in their study that “children with poor academic self-concepts are often described as having low self-esteem[‡]” (p.143). Consistent with this view, Westbury (1994) was of the opinion that “the emotional strain attached to repeating a grade would lower self-esteem in repeaters” (p.248).

Chetcuti and Griffiths (2002) revealed in their study of the “implications for student self-concept of ordinary differences in schools of Malta and England that the self-concept of students is affected by their perceived ability, especially as formalized from test results or other assessments” (p.544). Similarly, Psacharopoulos, Rojas, and Velez (1993) also found in their study of cognitive achievement of third and fifth graders that “repeaters had a negative self-esteem” (p.272).

A research study by Pomplun (1988) indicated that “students, who were retained, displayed a significant decrease in self-concept” (p.285). Consistent with this view, Westbury (1994) explored in her study that “the emotional strain attached to repeating a grade would lower self-concept in repeaters” (p.248). Furthermore, Anderson (2000) also endorsed in his study that “repetition has an effect on dropout statistics: it lowers self-concept and isolates the student from his/her friends and peers” (p.121). In the same way, Stearns, Moller, Blau, and Potochnick (2007) demonstrated in their study that “retained students have lower self-concept than continuously promoted students” (p.231).

[†]The self-concept is said to be a set of planned self-attitudes that are relatively established and “characteristic” of an individual (Demo,1992, p.303).

[‡] Self-concept and self-esteem are often used as synonyms in research literature.

Rosenberg, Schooler and Schoenbach (1989) indicated that “the well-established relationship between self-concept and academic performance is primarily attributable to the effects of school marks on self-concept” (p.1014). The authors used “a panel of 1886 adolescent boys to explore the reciprocal relationships between self-concept and poor school performance” (p.1004). The findings showed that “school marks have a significant effect on self-concept” (p.1015). Moreover, this study also revealed that “the relationship between self-concept and school performance is primarily attributable to the effect of school performance on self-concept” (p.1004). Similarly, the findings of another study by Rosenberg, et al (1995) indicated that the “degree to which specific academic self-concept affects global self-esteem, particularly the positive component of global self-esteem, is a function of how highly academic performance is personally valued” (p.141).

Owens (1994) used non-recursive linear structural equation models and collected data from the “Youth in Transition study, to compare the reciprocal interrelations of self-deprecation (negative self-evaluations), positive self-worth (positive self-evaluations), and global self-esteem (which includes both positive and negative evaluations) on high school grades” (p.391). The data indicated that “school achievement is important to adolescent self-worth, as theory suggests, and that it may foster positive feelings when grades are high and stimulate self-reproach when grades are low” (p.405). Consistent with this view, Burfeind and Bartusch (2006) stated that “poor school performance leads to frustration and anger and subsequently to delinquent behavior” (p.320).

Gipps and Tunstall (1998) endorsed in their study that “the development of a favorable self-concept in children is dependent upon perceiving themselves as successful, this in turn may depend on the way the child interprets the teachers' reaction to his/her performances” (p.151). Similarly, Chetcuti and Griffiths (2002) stated that “the self-concept of students is affected by their perceived ability, especially as formalized from test results or other assessments” (p.544).

Situation Analysis in Pakistan

In line with the international commitment of Millennium Development Goals, Government of Pakistan has decided to implement the policy of automatic promotion in the first three grades of primary level (with some variations across the provinces) in all public schools of Pakistan in 2002. The basic aim of this policy was to increase the enrolment ratio by lowering the dropout rate at primary level for achieving the target of universal primary education. Due to this policy, almost all students of first three grades in the public schools are automatically promoted ignoring the academic performance they have shown throughout the year. As a result, majority of poor performers reach grade four and then they are retained here as they are considered academically wanting to appear in the departmental

examination. In this way, the first experience of grade retention affects them severely and they feel very disturbed and shocked. Most of these students leave school in order to avoid expected insult by peers and teachers. The latest official statistics have confirmed this fact also (Government of Pakistan, 2006; AEPAM, 2008-2009).

Table 1

Dropout Rates by Grade and Gender at Primary Level for Public Sector Institutions (2005)

Grades	Dropout Rates		
	Total	Boys	Girls
Between Grade I and II	14.1%	16.1%	11.2%
Between Grade II and III	3.7%	8.6%	-
Between Grade III and IV	5.0%	7.4%	1.5%
Between Grade IV and V	8.5%	9.9%	6.5%

Source: National Education Census, 2005, Government of Pakistan, 2006-b, p.32

As revealed by Table 1, the dropout rate between grade four to five is 8.5 %, which is higher than the dropout rate between grade two to four, i.e.3.7%, 5.0% respectively. The existing educational practice in primary education system is said to be one of the possible causes of this high dropout rate. This fact is also described by a high number of repeaters at primary level by the data taken from latest reports of Pakistan Education Statistics as revealed in Table 2 respectively.

Table 2

Enrolment Statistics at primary level in the public schools (Pakistan) (2007-08)

Grade	% of Repeaters Compared to Total Enrolment	
	2006-07	2008-09
1	4.5%	3.5%
2	3.9%	2.8%
3	3.9%	2.6%
4	7.0%	4.5%
5	1.3%	0.6%

Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2007-08, AEPAM, 2009

Table 2 reveals that, the number of students repeat grade four is greater as compared to the grade two, three and five of primary level in the public schools of Pakistan.

This miserable situation is perhaps due to the existing policy of automatic promotion in first three grades along with final departmental examinations at the end of 5th grade. The official statistics evident that the current governmental policy and attitude of the schools' authorities towards slow learners has severely affected the performance of 4th grade students. Poverty is a major social problem in Pakistan, and when a student fails

in some grade having low socio-economic background, his/her parents do not agree to spend money and time for an extra year. So, majority of the students leave the school for doing some work, thus increasing dropout rate. In addition to this, the students who repeat the same grade are subject to continuous criticism of class fellow even their teachers also criticize them, because primary school teachers are not very well-aware of the self-concept and other personality development factors of the students.

On the basis of above discussion, it was needed to identify the impact of failure on the self-concept of fourth grade students, especially in the context of a developing country like Pakistan. Therefore, the present study is designed to investigate the possible effects of academic failure on the self-concept of students of grade four in public schools in the context of Pakistan. It is anticipated that, this study would be useful to identify issues related to academic failure of primary grade students to develop effective strategies to handle this problem in the primary education system in Pakistan where the high dropout at primary level is considered as a big hurdle in the way of achieving the target of universal primary education.

Method

The present study was descriptive in nature and quantitative techniques were applied to achieve the study objectives. As the automatic promotion policy is homogenously implemented at primary level in all public schools of Pakistan, therefore, by employing convenient sampling technique, the 4th grade students (N=238) of the public schools (N=42) of Rawalpindi city was selected as the study sample. Out of these 42 public schools, 8 were elementary and the other 34 were primary. Majority of the primary public schools included in the sample, were co-education institutions (both boys and girls studying together) but there were separate schools for boys and girls also. However, all elementary schools were gender specific. The determination of sample size selected from each school of the present study was very complex. It was decided with the consultation of experts to take 20% students of total enrolled students of grade four from each school as poor performers. This large value was taken due to greater probability of dropout cases after failure as revealed by official statistics (GoP, 2006). A two-phase panel study was designed to collect quantitative data. First phase was conducted before academic failure and second phase was completed after academic failure of the students.

For the study of self-concept of the students, “Beck Youth inventory[§] for self-concept (BSCI-Y)” was adapted (Beck, Beck, Jolly and Steer, 2005). The Cronbach’s Alfa reliability of the Urdu version of this 20 item scale was measured by using SPSS** 13.0 with a sample of 48 students of age group 11 to 14 studying in grade four of the public schools of Rawalpindi city. The reliability level of .88 was attained that was quite near to the reliability (0.89 for girls and, 0.91 for boys) measured by the authors of the scale with a sample of 400 children (girls= 201 and boys=199) of age 7 to 10 (Beck et al., 2005, p.39) The Urdu translation of the scale was administered to the sample students in the two phases. The self-concept scale was administered to the sample at the start of last term in January of 2009. The report of the annual school examination served for the purpose of dividing the sample into two groups, i.e. failed and promoted students. The result record of annual examination held in March 2009 of the grade four in the sample schools was taken for this purpose.

The sample students (both promoted and failed) were reassessed by the same scale in the first month of the successive academic year.

Analysis

Following the collection of data and coding of completed self-concept scale, the statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 13.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). T-test sampling techniques were carried out to demonstrate how the performance in annual examination effects the self-concept of students.

There were total 238 cases taken from the grade four of forty two public primary schools of Rawalpindi city. The sample included poor performers studying in grade four. After announcement of annual school result, this sample was divided into failed and successful students. The failed students repeat grade four while successful students promoted to grade five. There were 91 promoted, 147 failed and out of promoted 5 cases whereas 30 failed students left school. Due to left cases, the remaining sample of the study was reduced to 203.

The situation analysis of the whole study sample in the next academic year is described as follows:

[§] The Beck Youth Inventory for self-concept (BSCI-Y) used to assess self-concepts in children between the ages of 7 and 10 years old.

^{**} SPSS, Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

Table 3*Sample Division (pass/fail) of the sample on the basis of Annual School Result (N=238)*

Category	frequency	Dropout/left	Retained
Successful	91(38.24%)	05 (5.4%)	86 (94.6 %)
Failed	147(61.76%)	30 (20.4%)	117 (79.6 %)

Table 3 presented the distribution of the whole study sample (N=238) on the basis of annual school results. Out of total 238 fourth grade students, 91 (38.24%) were declared successful in annual examination, among them 5(5.4%) were left the school and 86 (94.6%) remained in the same school and continued their education. There are 147 (61.76%) students who failed in annual examination, out of them, 30 (20.4%) were dropped out^{††} from school, whereas 117 (79.6%) continued their studies and repeated the same grade.

Table 4*Gender wise Description of the Study Sample on the basis of Annual School Results (N=238)*

Category	frequency	Passed	Failed
Boys	114 (47.8%)	40 (64.9%)	74(35.1%)
Girls	124 (52.1%)	51 (41.1%)	73(58.8%)

Table 4 presents the gender description of the study sample excluding drop out and left cases. There were 114 (37.4 %) boys and 191 (62.6 %) girls included in the sample having total number 305 of fourth grade students. Out of 114 boys, 40 (64.9%) were passed and 74 (35.1%) were declared fail in annual examination. In the girls' sample, 51 (41.1%) were passed and 73 (58.8%) failed in examination. The reason of greater percentage of female students was the greater number of girls' enrolment ratio in public primary schools included in the study sample.

Table 5*Gender wise Description of the whole Study Sample (N=238)*

Category	frequency	left	Retained
Boys	114 (47.8%)	22 (19.3%)	92 (80.7%)
Girls	124 (52.1%)	13 (10.4%)	111 (89.5%)

Table 5 presents the situation analysis of study sample on the basis of gender. There were total 114 (47.8 %) boys' sample, among them 22 (19.3 %) left the school and 92 (80.7 %) retained in school and continued their studies in the same school. There were 124 (52.1 %) girls in the whole sample, 13 (10.4 %) left the school and 111 (89.5 %) remained in the same schools and continued their studies.

^{††} As according the schools' report, these students left school without taking school leaving certificate, so they considered as dropout.

In order to see the impact of success and failure on the self-concept of the students, the self-concept scores of the failed and promoted group of sample students before annual examination (Phase 1) was compared with their self-concept scores after examination (phase 2).

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics regarding Self-Concept^{††} of the study sample (N=203)

Variables	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	Std. deviation
SC-1 ^{§§}	30.00	65.00	47.69	7.84
SC-2 ^{***}	28.00	65.00	47.43	7.66

Table 6 presents the descriptive statistics regarding self-concept scores of the study sample in Phase 1 and Phase 2. The self-concept scores of the study sample in both phases also demonstrated some similarities. The minimum self-concept score in Phase 1 was 30.00 that was declined to 28.00 in Phase 2. The maximum self-concept score of the study sample was same in both phases. The mean score for self-concept of students in Phase 1 was 47.69 with a standard deviation of 7.84 and the mean score for self-concept of the students in Phase 2 was 47.36 with a standard deviation of 7.80.

As discussed earlier, the whole study sample was further divided into two sub categories i.e. failed sample and promoted sample, so their separate descriptive statistics were also calculated in order to get clearer picture of the whole sample.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics regarding Self-Concept of Failed Sample (n=117)

Variables	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	Std. deviation
SC-1	30.00	62.00	47.56	7.59
SC-2	28.00	60.00	44.64	7.29

With respect to failed sample, the Table 7 indicates that the minimum self-concept score in Phase 1 was 30.00 and maximum score was 62.00. The mean score in Phase 1 was 47.56 with a standard deviation of 7.59. In the Phase 2, the minimum self-concept score of failed students was 28.00 whereas, the maximum score was 56.00. The mean score of self-concept in phase 2 was 42.65 with a standard deviation of 6.48.

^{††} Total score for Self-Concept (SC) =65

^{§§} SC-1= Self- Concept score in phase 1(before annual school examination).

^{***} SC-2= Self-Concept score in phase 2 (in the first month of successive year).

Table 8*Descriptive Statistics regarding Self-concept of Promoted Sample (n=86)*

Variables	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	Std. deviation
SC-1	30.00	65.00	47.77	8.01
SC-2	30.00	65.00	44.64	7.55

Table 8 presents the descriptive statistics of promoted sample regarding their self-concept scores in both phases. In Phase 1, the minimum self-concept score of promoted sample was 30.00 and maximum score was 65.00. The mean score in Phase 1 was 47.77 with a standard deviation of 8.01. In the Phase 2, the minimum self-concept score of promoted students was 30.00 whereas, the maximum score was 65.00. The mean score of self-concept in phase 2 was 49.16 with a standard deviation of 7.55.

Table 9*Comparison of Self-Concept (Phase 1 &Phase 2) of Failed sample (n=117) and Promoted sample (n=86)*

	Failure		Promoted	
	Mean	t-value	Mean	t-value
SC-2	44.64		49.16	
VS		-6.80***		5.51***
SC-1	47.56		47.77	

*** Significant at .000

Table 9 presents the comparison of self-concept of failed and promoted sample in two times, i.e. before annual examination and after examination. The mean of self-concept score of failed sample after examination (phase 2) was 44.64 and before examination (Phase 1) was 47.56. The mean difference ($t = -6.80$) between the two set of scores was found highly significant at .000 alpha. The negative sign of t -value indicated a decrease in the self-concept of this sample after failure.

The mean of self-concept score of promoted students after examination was 49.16 and before examination (Phase 1) was 47.77. The findings of the t -test for self-concept scores ($t = 5.51$) of the before annual examination and just after examination revealed significant results at .000 alpha.

The analysis presents in the Table 9 depicted highly significant impact of academic failure on the self-concept of the students. The analysis demonstrated that the mean differences of self-concept scores of failed students revealed negative impact of academic failure, whereas, the mean differences of self-concept of promoted students showed positive significant results after success in annual examination.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study, the main objective was to find out the impact of academic failure was on the self-concept of the students. This objective was achieved by applying quantitative techniques on the self-concept scores of the failed and promoted students before annual examination (phase 1) with their self-concept scores after examination (phase 2). The statistical analysis demonstrated that mean differences of failed sample revealed negative impact of failure, whereas, the mean differences of self-concept score of promoted students showed positive and significant results of success in annual examination. This conclusion is also supported by a number of research studies, (Pomplun, 1988; Westbury, 1994; Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994; Trethewey, 1999; Anderson, 2000; Stearns et al., 2007).

The findings of this study revealed that, the first experience of academic failure affects their self-concept badly and they feel very disturbed and shocked. It was also found that 30 students left school after failure in annual examination without taking school leaving certificate^{†††}. In this way, they dropped out from education system. Most of these students leave school in order to avoid expected insult by peers and teachers in the repeated year. It may be because of their limited financial resources as the entire sample schools located in the economically deprived areas of Rawalpindi city.

The latest official statistics have confirmed this fact also (GoP, 2006; AEPAM, 2008). The statistics clearly reveal that the automatic promotion in first three grades and then high rate of retention at grade four has proved an unsuccessful practice. Literature on grade retention and automatic promotion policy demonstrates that these policies would prove workable if accompanied by other helping measures, such as special coaching and summer classes etc, (Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Gomes-Neto & Hanushek, 1994).

The findings of the present study revealed that the psychological aspect of the students' personality is significantly affected their academic performance. Presently, the child psychology has a dominant place in the curriculum of teacher education. In practical situation, the teachers' attitude especially at primary level does not present a learned behavior. It reveals that the teacher education and training programs are based on theoretical knowledge and not on practical expertise and are not as effective as they should be. The researcher recommends that while designing teacher training programs the practical aspects of child psychology along with theoretical considerations ought to be build up as depicted in the conclusion of the present study. If the practical aspects of child behavior are incorporated into the training programs, they may become more viable, relevant and acceptable for the teachers.

^{†††}School leaving certificate is a necessary requirement for admission in other school.

Moreover, the literature review clearly demonstrated that other factors such as socioeconomic status of the parents and parent-child affection are also main contributing factors in the development of self-concept of the students (Wiltfang & Scarbecz, 1990; Roberts & Bengtson, 1993). Further research in this area could explore the significant role of these factors.

Recommendations of the Study

The findings of the present study revealed that the psychological aspect of self-concept is associated with the phenomenon of academic failure. The role of teacher is discovered as very crucial especially for failed students. The teacher should encourage students in a manner, that they perceive themselves as efficient individuals, through their own effort and responsibility during the learning process.

In the light of study findings, the researcher recommends that primary teachers should realize the significance of psychological aspect of the child development in teaching practice. They should be more caring and considerate about their students' needs and interests and should help them define their personal goals. The researcher further recommends that while designing teacher training programs, the practical aspects of child psychology along with theoretical considerations ought to be build up as depicted in the conclusion of the present study. If the practical aspects of child behavior are incorporated into the training programs, they may become more viable, relevant and acceptable for the teachers.

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