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Title	A measure of self-esteem in Singapore secondary schools
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Source	<i>Singapore Journal of Education</i> , 7(1), 22-26
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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# A Measure of Self-Esteem in Singapore Secondary Schools

*Elena Lui Hab Wah*

## **What Is Self-Esteem and Why Is It Important?**

Stanley Coopersmith (1981, p. 5) defines self-esteem as "the evaluation a person makes and customarily maintains with regard to him- or herself. 'Self-esteem' expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval and indicates the extent to which a person believes him- or herself capable, significant, successful and worthy." This judgement of worthiness of oneself is relatively enduring and general rather than transitory and specific. A person's self-esteem may vary across different areas of experience and role-defined conditions but one will presumably weigh these areas according to their subjective importance and then arrive at a general level of self-esteem. Attitude toward the "self" may or may not be noticed consciously. However, it can be detected through one's behaviour and performance.

With the national productivity movement, people-centred management has become a great concern in Singapore. The ultimate goal is to help every individual Singaporean develop his potentials to the maximum. "Success will depend upon getting our workers better educated, with better attitudes and more team spirit." (Lee Kuan Yew, Eve of National Day Message, 1981). Such workers are self-motivated to do their work well and take up other side duties willingly and promptly. They have self-discipline such as being punctual and keeping the work place clean and tidy. They will also take the initiative to help out in the work of their fellow-workers. While managers must manage people by understanding the concept of "self force", the more so must teachers while teaching pupils. The "self" as a social product is organized, dynamic and learned (Roger, 1951). It is necessary for a person to have positive regards both for others and for himself. Coopersmith

reports (1967) that persons high in self-esteem approach tasks and people with the expectation that they will be successful and well-received, persons low in self-esteem are more destructive and anxious. Wylie (1961) reveals that persons who seek psychological help frequently acknowledge that they suffer from feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. The studies by Brookover (1967) and Shavelson (1976) have led many educators to focus on the enhancement of self-concept as both a goal in itself and a means to achieve other educational objectives. A local study (Goh, 1977) found that the "high" group in self-esteem tended to be those who did fairly well academically, had higher achievement motivation and were generally better liked by their classmates than the "low" group.

## **How is Self-Esteem Measured?**

There are two approaches to measuring self-esteem, namely, self-reporting and other's observation. For self-reporting one can use the Self-Esteem Inventories (Coopersmith, 1981) or similar instruments. For observation, teachers can use behaviour rating forms such as the Behavioural Academic Self-Esteem (Coopersmith, 1981).

The Self-Esteem Inventories (SEI) have three forms: School Form, School Short Form and Adult Form. The School Form consists of 58 items including eight items that constitute the Lie Scale. The 50 items on self-esteem come under four subscales: General-Self, Social Self-Peers, Home-Parents and School Academic. This form can be used on a group basis with students under teacher's supervision. Table 1 shows a segment of the SEI School Form. The School Short Form and Adult Form consist of only the first 25 items of the School Form and exclude the Lie Scale. To score

**TABLE 1 — SELF-ESTEEM INVENTORY (SEI)**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Please read each statement and record your response in the following way:

1. If the statement describes how you usually feel, put a (X) in the column "Like Me".
2. If the statement does not describe how you usually feel, put a (X) in the column "Unlike Me".

	Like Me	Unlike Me
1. Things usually don't bother me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I find it very hard to talk in front of the class.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. There are lots of things about myself I'd change if I could.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...		
13. Things are all mixed up in my life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...		
21. Most people are better liked than I am.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...		
58. I always know what to say to people.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

  

Gen	Soc	H	Sch	Total	L
<input type="checkbox"/> × 2 =	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Source: Stanley Coopersmith, "Self-Esteem Inventories", Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 1981.

the inventory, "1" will be assigned to the items indicating high self-esteem and "0" to those indicating low self-esteem. The maximum score is 100: raw score 50 × 2 in the School Form and raw score 25 × 4 in the School Short Form and Adult Form.

The SEI items were originally based on items selected from a scale by Rogers and Dymond (1954). This was administered to 1748 children attending public schools in central Connecticut, USA. The distribution of scores obtained from this sample was skewed in the direction of high self-esteem. Test-retest reliability after a three-year interval for a sample of 56 children was .70. Kokenes' (1974 and 1978) studies, which included over 7600 school children in grades 4 through 8, confirmed the construct validity of the SEI subscales. Spatz and Johnston (1973) administered this inventory to over 600 students in grades 5, 9, 12 in a rural school district. They found adequate internal consistency (KR 20s) for pupils in all three grades. On the basis of studies conducted or

reviewed by himself, Coopersmith found SEI scores significantly related to creativity, academic achievement, resistance to group pressure, willingness to express unpopular opinions, and perceptual constancy. Matteson (1974) also found it closely related to the effective communication between parents and youth as well as to family adjustment. Thus, it may be concluded that the SEI has shown acceptable reliability and validity.

### **How Do Singapore Pupils Fare in the Self-Esteem Inventories?**

This article collates the results obtained by ten teacher-trainees who opted for the Educational Studies Options courses on "Helping the Adolescent" (Diploma-in-Education) and "Guidance in the Classroom" (Certificate-in-Education) conducted by the writer and her colleague, Mrs Esther Tan. These teacher-trainees administered the 25-item Short Form of the SEI during their teaching practice and subsequently submitted their reports

**TABLE 2 — MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF LOCAL PUPILS' SEI SCORES**

Level	Total			Male			Female		
	N	X	SD	N	X	SD	N	X	SD
Sec 1	94	57.57	15.57	32	63.00	16.57	62	54.77	13.87
Sec 2	144	52.31	15.28	61	56.39	14.23	83	49.30	15.40
Sec 3	73	53.80	15.35	59	54.91	15.49	14	49.14	14.33
Sec 4	31	56.52	17.46	21	55.62	19.43	10	58.40	13.09
Total	342	54.46	15.59	173	57.02	15.92	169	51.83	14.84

**TABLE 3 — SCORES DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SEX BY LEVEL**

Source	N	df	MS	SS	F	PR > F
Sec 1	94	1	1428.14	1428	6.49	0.013
Sec 2	144	1	1768.53	1768	7.94	0.006
Sec 3	73	1	377.02	377	1.61	0.208 (n.s.)
Sec 4	31	1	52.39	52	0.17	0.686 (n.s.)

in partial fulfilment of the course requirements set by the Institute of Education.

These ten projects covered a sample of 342 pupils (173 boys and 169 girls, age ranging from 13 to 16) from Secondary 1 to 4 classes. As shown in Table 2, the means and SD of their scores are 54.46 and 15.59 respectively. According to Coopersmith's studies, the American samples have SEI scores skewed in the direction of high esteem. The means have generally been in the range of 70 to 80 with a SD of 11 to 13. In contrast, the pupils studied here seem to have lower self-esteem scores (49.14 to 63.00) with a larger SD range (13.09 to 19.43). However, it does not necessarily mean that Singapore pupils feel "more inferior" or "less worthy" than their American counterparts. In fact, the mean scores of the local sample are above 50 on a 100 point scale.

The large SD range of scores may reflect the heterogeneous characteristics of local pupils who come from two different courses: Normal and Express. (Based on the results of the Primary School Leaving Examination, pupils promoted to Secondary 1 will be streamed to one of the 3 courses: (1) Normal Course — a 5-year secondary course

leading to GCE 'O' level examination, (2) Express Course — a 4-year course leading to GCE 'O' level examination, and (3) Special Course — a 4-year course with two first languages.)

The analysis of variance showing scores difference between sex by grade levels is only significant at Secondary 1 and 2 (Table 3). Probably, the under-representation of girls in the Secondary 3 and 4 sample is the main reason for this phenomenon.

### Is SEI a Suitable Test for Singapore Pupils?

Generally speaking, Oriental culture values humility and encourages the young to seek improvement but never to feel "proud" of what they are. Therefore, an item such as "There are lots of things about myself I'd change if I could" should be a positive trait instead of a negative one. Language difficulties may also get in the way. For example, in the item "Things are all *mixed up* in my life", the phrase "mixed up" is not commonly used in the local context.

Despite the above limitations, the writer is of the view that with some modifications, the SEI can be a suitable instrument to measure local pupils' self-esteem; the modifications include the following:

1 In the response column, replace "Like Me" and "Unlike Me" with "Yes" and "No", because the word "like" has two meanings: it means "the same" in "Like Me" and "to be fond of" in "Most people are better liked than I am".

2 Change the phrases "mixed up" and "better liked" to "confused" and "more popular" or other more concise phrases so that pupils will not interpret them wrongly.

3 In the School Form use "people" rather than "kids" because secondary school pupils will find it disconcerting referring to their friends as "kids".

It is also recommended that for pupils who are less proficient in the English Language the School Short Form should be administered instead; while the School Form which has 58 items including a Lie Scale can be used in Upper Secondary and Junior College Classes. In addition to the SEI, the Behavioural Academic Self-Esteem (BASE) — an observation rating scale — can be completed by teachers to counter check whether the pupils' self-reporting is accurate or otherwise. (An extract of the BASE is shown in Table 4.) The BASE, a modified version of the Coopersmith Behaviour Rating

**TABLE 4 — BEHAVIOURAL ACADEMIC SELF-ESTEEM: A RATING SCALE**

Stanley Coopersmith and Ragnar Gilberts

<b>INSTRUCTIONS:</b> This scale is designed to provide an estimate of the academic self-esteem of your students. Your judgments of the frequencies of several important behaviours will form the basis of the student's score. Please base these judgments on the specific behaviours you have observed in your classroom.						
Student Name _____		Age _____		Sex _____		
Class _____			School _____			
Rater Name _____				Date _____		
		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Usually	Always
<b>I Student Initiative</b>						
1.	This child is willing to undertake new tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>II Social Attention</b>						
7.	This child is quiet in class, speaks in turn, and talks appropriately.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>III Success/Failure</b>						
10.	This child deals with mistakes or failures easily and comfortably.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>IV Social Attraction</b>						
12.	This child's company is sought by peers.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>V Self-Confidence</b>						
16.	This child appreciates his or her work, work products, and activities.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Total BASE Score</b> _____						

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Form, measures the academic self-esteem factors as follows: (1) Student Initiative, (2) Social Attention, (3) Success/Failure, (4) Social Attraction, and (5) Self-confidence. The BASE theory states that high self-esteem children are active, exploratory, persistent, self-confident and have social attraction. It also believes that these traits can be picked up by teachers through the children's behaviour.

There is little doubt as to the importance of knowing the self-esteem of pupils. And the SEI is a suitable instrument to measure this as it can be easily administered and scored. If teachers find the BASE too time consuming they can use it only with pupils whose SEI scores are either very high or very low to check the validity of their SEI scores. ■

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