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THE MOTIVATION, SELF ESTEEM, STUDY HABITS & PROBLEMS OF NORMAL TECHNICAL STUDENTS

Agnes Chang Shook Cheong

INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the first cohort of the Normal Technical students will be sitting for their special 'N' Level examination. From a small pilot study of the first cohort at Secondary 1, the Normal Technical students were found to have positive self-esteem and above average achievement motivation.

After three years in the Normal Technical stream, are these students still highly positive about themselves? Do they have any problems with their studies? Are their teachers and parents supportive?

A survey was carried out in eight schools (four mission and four government schools) to find out the motivational level, self-esteem, study habits, problem and anxieties and perception of classroom environment of Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 Normal Technical students in 1995. Teachers teaching these students were also asked to comments on their classroom behaviour and their own attempts in motivating these students. Altogether, 481 Normal Technical students, 91 teachers and 7 principals participated in the survey. In addition, one enthusiastic school also provided data from a small group of 76 Normal Academic students for comparison.

COMPARISON BETWEEN SEC. 1 AND SEC. 2 STUDENTS

The Secondary 1 students had significantly higher self-esteem than Secondary 2 students. Similarly, Secondary 2 students were also doing better for academic achievement motivation. The decline in self-esteem and academic achievement motivation of the Secondary 2 students concurred with the observations made by four of the seven principals from the sample schools. The initial surge of pride in being secondary students may soon be undermined by the hard truth that they were not able to follow

the lessons (see Section on Problems and Anxieties). They probably realised too that it would be quite difficult for them to take the "O" and "A" Level examinations too.

The Secondary 2 students were slightly better in their study habits. But only the difference in concentration between the two levels is noticeable. The Secondary 2 students, being older, seemed to concentrate better as a whole. The differences between Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 students for retention, time-management, studying of text, listening in class and taking tests were negligible.

COMPARISON BETWEEN NORMAL TECHNICAL AND NORMAL ACADEMIC STUDENTS

There is a large discrepancy between the sample size of the Normal Technical and the Normal Academic students. This comes about because one of the sample schools decided to collect data on the Normal Academic students as well. Hence we have to treat the findings with caution.

The Normal Technical students actually had higher self-esteem than the Normal Academic students. For the Normal Technical students, getting into the Secondary school was a bonus and teachers had also been told to treat them kindly. On the hand, The Normal Academic students are expected to strive to get into N5 in order to sit for the "O" level examination together with the Express stream students. Hence the Normal Academic students are often compared unfavourably with the Express Stream students. This would in a way have affected their self-esteem.

Though the Normal Academic students had higher scores for academic achievement, the difference margin is not too wide.

The score differences in study habits between the two groups revealed the discrepancy in academic ability between the Technical and Academic streams. For every study habit surveyed, the Academic students had a better score and the differences between the two groups were significant.

COMPARISON BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE NORMAL STREAM STUDENTS

The female students were more motivated to achieve than the male students . While the female students were motivated to achieve, they did not have good study habits. The male students scored slightly better for all the surveyed study habits especially in concentration.

PROBLEMS AND ANXIETIES

School

From the responses of the subjects, the most outstanding problem encountered in school was their inability to understand lessons in school. As many as 56.8% of the respondents cited this problem. Some teachers actually commented that their students were not able to relate to some of the topics taught. About a third of the respondents complained that there was too much work (35.6%), classmates/ schoolmates were unfriendly (35.6%) and they were bullied in class (36.2%). As many as 49.7% of the respondents found the school rules too strict for them. About 30% found school life boring and 25.9% did not like the many tests imposed on them. Nineteen percent found the teachers unsympathetic and 23.5% were discouraged by the many criticisms and lack of encouragement from teachers. Having conflicts with classmates/ schoolmates upset 20.5% of the respondent. About 17% were honest about their disinterest in learning.

Home

A third of the respondents found their home environment too noisy (33.2%). Like typical adolescents, relationship problems featured quite strongly with the Normal stream students. Thirty-one percent lamented that their parents were not understanding and 27.9% had problems with their siblings. In trying to establish their need for autonomy, 25% had conflicts with parents over friends and another 22% were upset with their parents for not allowing them to stay out late. Some parents were found to impose a strict schedule for homework (19%).

About 17% of the respondents were stressed by the unrealistic demands made by their parents. The unrealistic demand was borne out by the fact that 40% of the parents expected these Normal students to complete University of Polytechnic studies. In direct contrast, only 7.6% of the respondents expected to complete tertiary education. Most of them were realistic about their abilities and 34.4% expected to attend ITE courses. On the other hand, only 9.5 % of the parents wanted their children to take ITE courses. In Singapore, the strong emphasis and high value placed on academic qualifications are reflected by the wishes expressed by the respondents to complete "O" level (24.2%) and "A" (19.2%) certificates.

It is encouraging to note that 71.3% of the parents rewarded their children when they did well in examinations. Only 28.7% of the parents did nothing to encourage their children. When examination or test results were not up to expectation, 31.2% of parents helped their children to understand their shortcomings and another 9.5% engaged a tutor to help their children. About 43% did the usual scolding and beating routine. Only 13.8% were indifferent to their children's results.

Most of the respondents studied at home (58.9%) or in school (20.5%). Eighty-three percents of the parents ensured that their children get a quiet place to study at home. About 83% of the students spent more than 2 hours a day watching television while 62.8% spent less than an hour a day on their studies. Teachers had commented that their lack of language competency has resulted in their learning difficulty. This can be explained by the fact that only 17.5% spoke English at home and 27% communicated with their friends in English. Mandarin and dialects were the dominant languages used. Many of them (37.7%) spoke Mandarin at home and with their friends (53.8%). Dialect were used by 21.7% at home with family members. Twenty-five percent admitted that they had problems in their studies because of their poor English. A third of the respondents could not concentrate (33.3%) and another 32.1% could not understand their lessons. Only 17.8% confessed that they were lazy and another 24.3% admitted that they were more interested in making money than their studies. Surprisingly, most of the respondents read at least a book a month. Only 15.7% read no books at all.

CONCLUSION

The results indicated that there was a decline in self-esteem and achievement motivation as the Normal Technical students moved up the levels in secondary schools. What is more worrying is the poor study habits they had. The average mean score for each habit was below average. The older Secondary 2 students were slightly better in their study habits, especially for concentration.

The Technical students had better self-esteem than their Academic counterparts but the Academic students were more motivated to achieve. The better academic results of the Academic students could be accounted for by their study habits though the scores were still very low.

There was not much difference in the self-esteem between the genders. The female students had significantly better scores for achievement orientation but lower scores for the study habits. The male students showed significantly better concentration over the girls,

About 50% of the respondents complained that they could not follow the lessons in class. This is related to the lack of competency in the English Language. It is not a surprising finding as only a small percentage used English as their medium of communication with family members or peers. Mandarin and dialects ruled the day. Despite special caution to teachers about treating the Normal Technical students kindly, some students found their teachers unsympathetic and critical. But less than 17% of the respondents actually admitted that they were not interested in learning.

The nature of conflicts with parents was quite common and involved a struggle for more autonomy to run their own lives concerning friends and staying out late. The finding that was worrying was the unrealistic expectation of the parents – 40% of these parents wanted their Normal technical students to attain tertiary education. In contrast, the students were more realistic and aspired to do ITE courses. However, 24% of them still hoped to do the GCE "O" Level and another 18% the "A" Level. Despite their "high" aspiration for academic qualification, they were

spending more time in front of the TV than with their books. More than 55% of the respondents spent 1 hour or less on their homework/studies everyday.

From the findings, we can see that there are a number of urgent tasks for the teachers in school to consider and take action:

1. Teach the Normal students study skills.
2. Review the curriculum to ensure relevancy for these weaker students.
3. Try to be more patient and less critical with the Normal students.
4. Help them to improve their language competency.
5. Counsel students and parents on the possible career paths for these students.
6. Guide students in their study schedule in order for them to achieve their aspiration.

The study has yielded useful information which gives educationists a more realistic and revealing picture of the needs, problems and anxieties of the Normal Technical students.