

**SELF-ESTEEM AND ACADEMIC  
ACHIEVEMENT  
IN 7 AND 8 YEAR OLD MALTESE PUPILS**

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# **ABSTRACT**

## **Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement in a Sample of 7 and 8 year old Maltese Students.**

The aims of the present study were to investigate academic ability differences on self-esteem. This study also sought to investigate the relationship between sex, age, family size, fathers' occupation and the students' self-esteem. Measures of self-esteem were obtained through an instrument which was constructed and administered by the present authors.

A sample of 72 students (36 boys and 36 girls) in year 3 and 4, of a primary school were selected by the class teachers. The following data were gathered: self-esteem measures, academic achievement measures, family size and father's occupation.

Normative data for the two age groups under investigation were provided. The female students obtained higher self-esteem scores than the male students. Positive relationships existed between academic achievement and scores in self-esteem. No significant evidence was found to support a relationship between age and high scores in self-esteem, however a relationship was found between age and low self-esteem, favouring older students and low self-esteem scores. A positive relationship was obtained between fathers' occupations and the child's self-esteem, while a negative relationship was detected between family size and self-esteem.

Supervisor:

Dr. Charles Mifsud.

## DEDICATION

*I, Rita Camilleri, dedicate this essay to my beloved parents Frank and Rose, my fiancé Anthony, his parents Anthony and Carmen, and my god-mother Linda, whose endless encouragement, support and love have made my achievements possible.*

*I, Oriana Spiteri, dedicate this essay to my mother Carmen, my late father Joseph, my fiancé Patrick, and his parents Emanuel and Maria, on whom I could always count during the most difficult moments.*

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We would like to thank our supervisor Dr. Charles Mifsud for his help and guidance. The following individuals also provided enormous support and encouragement whenever we needed it:

- the Head Teachers, Teachers and Students at the Primary School we visited.
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Rita Camilleri

Oriana Spiteri

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# CHAPTER 1

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## INTRODUCTION

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Until the early 1960's, educational theorists believed that academic performance was influenced by variables such as IQ, parental pressure, family size and socioeconomic status. However, such factors offer a narrow and limited explanation of academic achievement. Thus, according to Robert Burns (1982), it was obvious that "the construct of the self-concept, or his/her attitudes to and perception of himself/herself, are intimately related to how he/she learns and behaves".

The self-concept is a combination of attitudes and beliefs about the self, evaluations of self and behavioural possibilities. This implies that the self-concept is comprised of numerous qualities and attitudes we ascribe to ourselves. The self-concept appears to develop through various interconnected sources such as body image and appearance and feedback from significant others, i.e., parents, teachers, peers (Burns, 1982). The latter provide the individual with a sense of worth and confirm his/her acceptance, together with coping strategies and abilities to succeed or fail in chosen tasks (Burns, 1982). The feedback provided concerns many aspects of development. Areas include social competencies, physical development, emotional development and academic achievement. In short, the self-concept is comprised of two components: the self image, a subjective judgement of self characteristics and a self-evaluative element (Burns, 1982). The self-evaluative component has been termed "self-esteem".

The present study will deal with self-esteem, which can be defined as "an

evaluation of the information contained in the self-concept, and is derived from a child's feelings about all things he is. An individual's self-esteem, then, is based upon a combination of objective information about oneself and subjective evaluation of that information". (Craighead, McHale and Pope, 1988; 2).

Self-esteem is critical to the individual's welfare because it determines the ambitions or boundaries the individual sets for himself, the attitudes they maintain, the behaviours they take on and the exchanges initiated with others.

Individuals with low self-esteem tend to exhibit "an artificially positive self-attitude to the world, in a desperate attempt to prove to others -- and himself -- that he is an adequate person" (Craighead, McHale and Pope, 1988, 2). Or the individual may retreat internally, with feelings of anxiety, self-doubt and inferiority. Social relationships, education and work tend to suffer because individuals with low self-esteem feel inadequate and believe they are unable to succeed within their personal lives and work environment.

Individuals with high self-esteem are considered to maintain a "healthy view of the self-one that realistically encompasses shortcomings but is not harshly critical of them". (Craighead, McHale and Pope, 1988; 2). An individual who has positive self-esteem evaluates himself in a positive light and regards his efforts and work with good feelings. These individuals often work hard at improving areas of weakness and are forgiving of themselves when goals are not attained. Furthermore, students with high self-esteem find schooling and education more rewarding than their fellow peers who suffer from low self-esteem. (Reid, 1982).

As previously acknowledged, significant others in the life of the individual,

specifically teachers, play a main role in the development of a child's self-esteem. Teachers, especially primary school teachers, need to understand the influence that they exude in the development of self-esteem in children. Teachers are required to evaluate the status of their pupil's self-esteem in order to determine the approach and guidance that needs to be adhered to. Students must be supported throughout their academic careers, and encouraged to compete "against his previous best, rather than against externally imposed standards he may never be able to attain". (Scerri, 1989, 4). The teacher needs to encourage pupils to experience success in all areas and tasks associated with academic involvement. In order to achieve academic success, teachers need to build up self-esteem in children.

In light of the significant position that self-esteem holds in academic achievement, the present study determines to investigate that relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement, in the context of the Maltese Islands. Other issues related to self-esteem including sex, age, fathers' occupation and family size will be under investigation.

It is the hope of the authors that the present study may lead to an appreciation of the importance of self-esteem with regards to academic achievement, along with further success and happiness in future social relationships and work experiences.

# CHAPTER 2

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## THE THEORY OF SELF-CONCEPT AND SELF-ESTEEM

## CHAPTER 2

### PREVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE THE THEORY OF SELF-CONCEPT AND SELF-ESTEEM

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical foundation to a few of the issues relevant to the current study. These include:

- i. the distinction between self-esteem and self-concept;
- ii. sources of self-esteem;
- iii. the effects if any, of sex, age, socio-economic status and family size on self-esteem.

#### **2.2 The Self-Concept and Self-Esteem**

The Self Concept is the way in which individuals perceive themselves. Burns (1982) claims that the self concept is comprised of two elements: the self-image (i.e. the way by which individuals perceive self characteristics) and the self-esteem which involves conceptualization of experience and the manner by which it influences individual's behaviour. The self-image involves a great deal of emotion and value which is a source of the individual's satisfaction. Self-esteem is derived from the individual's past performances and capabilities which stem from his own values and judgements. These values have been internalized by the individual, based on the values and judgements expressed by members of society and significant others (e.g. parents, teachers and peers). Coopersmith (1967) states that there are four major factors which encourage the development of self-esteem:

- i. the treatment and support obtained from significant others in life.
- ii. an individual's past successful experiences
- iii. values which enhance and interpret an individual's experiences
- iv. the way by which an individual responds to devaluation.

Carl Roger's (1951) explanation of the self-concept involves an "organized configuration of perceptions of the self .... It is composed of such element as the perceptions of one's characteristics and abilities; the percepts and concepts of self in relation to others and to the environment; the value qualities which are perceived as associated with experiences and objects; and goals and ideals which are perceived as having positive or negative valence" (Burns, 1982, 21). Rogers repeats that individuals require "positive regard" from others, in order to enhance and develop their self-concept. Thus, Rogers regards the self-concept as the way a person sees himself.

## **2.3 Sources of Self-esteem**

### **2.3.1 Body Image**

Burns (1982) states that during childhood and adolescence, individuals are concerned with their body size and shape. Individuals are subjected to ideal physical stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, portrayed through the media. The individual is likely to incorporate some of these concepts and perceptions into his/her own experience. Furthermore, individuals may or may not develop feelings of personal acceptance and adequacy through the absorption of media stereotypes.

Past studies have indicated that adolescent boys and girls who maintain a close match between personal body image and the ideal expressed by the individual,

manifest a high level of self-esteem. However, the issue of body image does not readily appear amongst children between the ages of 6 and 11. Thus, it is difficult to determine whether body image plays a significant role in the development of self-esteem amongst primary school children.

### **2.3.2 Language and Self- Esteem**

According to Burns (1982), the development of language is related to the development of self-esteem. "An indicator of the child's growing sense of being a separate individual from others is the acquisition of pronouns 'I', 'me', 'you', 'it' and 'them'" (Burns, 1982; 39). Language also promotes conceptions and evaluations about the self which are derived from the verbal feedback from others.

Non-verbal communication can also develop self-esteem. For example, a smile illustrates acceptance and approval while a frown illustrates feelings of disapproval. The existence of non-verbal communication affects how the individual perceives himself and therefore how he will behave (self-fulfilling prophecy).

### **2.3.3 Feedback from significant others**

Significant others are individuals who are deemed to be important or significant to the individual. Significant others may provide security, love, acceptance and support, thus, establishing their position as a significant person in the life of the individual.

During childhood, the individual's parents have the greatest impact on the development of self-esteem, due to established trust and support. Teachers may also be acknowledged as a significant other, in the life of an individual. Teachers evaluate students, either approving or disapproving, on an everyday basis. According to Staines (1958), pupils who believed that their teachers held them in high regard, experienced high levels of self-esteem. On the other hand, students who felt disapproval and unacceptance from their teachers, experienced low levels of self-esteem. Teachers stand to show "subtle influences through their verbal and non-verbal communications to pupils" (Burns, 1982; 177).

Another important source of self-esteem include the individual's peers. The peer group enables the individual to establish and secure their identity, while receiving support. According to Song and Huttie (1984), peer approval, not only affects an individual's self-esteem, but also has a major impact on the establishment of an academic self-esteem.

### **2.3.4 Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement**

According to Scerri (1989), upon "entry into the school, the 5 year-old brings with him an embryonic self-esteem engendered by the amount of parental interest and acceptance lavished on him". Therefore, each child begins his school career with an established self-worth which provides a set of expectations of scholastic performance. However, a child's self-esteem is not fully developed at this point, and it is likely to change during their school years.

Students are exposed to two different curricula: explicit, which is the conventional type of knowledge students are expected to learn; and, implicit,

involving the emotional and social curriculum by which students determine who they are, how others perceive him and how he perceives himself.

Students are subjected to this type of environment which instills, and promotes competition. "Due to the continuous appraisal of academic work, students are forced to reveal personal adequacies and inadequacies in public contests and thus, it is not surprising that students employ academic attainment as an important index of self worth" (Scerri, 1989; 12). Students who achieve academically, attribute their success to ability and thus, establish a positive self-image. They also experience positive relationships with parents, teachers and peers. In turn, students are motivated to continue and increase their academic success. However, those students who lack high self-esteem, reject success and attribute it to luck, rather than inability. Burns (1982) states that the "debilitating consequences of a low self-esteem on academic performance or reciprocally of poor academic performance on self-esteem have far more effect than the reciprocal facilitating consequences of high levels of self-esteem and academic performance".

## **2.4 Other variables affecting self-esteem.**

### **2.4.1 Sex**

Coopersmith (1967), Paschal (1968) and Simon and Simon (1975) found no significant differences in self-esteem between boys and girls. However, other researchers, such as Robinson-Awana (1986) have detected significant sex differences, which indicate higher levels of self-esteem amongst boys.

Numerous explanations have been put forth, in order to account for the higher levels of self-esteem amongst males. Some investigators have suggested that

"females are more willing to disclose their weaknesses as compared to males" (Scerri, 1989; 16). Other researchers indicate that societal beliefs and cultural expectations influence the developing child's beliefs. Girls are deemed to be weak and submissive, whereas boys are categorized as strong and assertive. Furthermore, societal pressure for boys to achieve academic success is greater than for girls.

According to Garrison and Garrison (1975), "male achievers feel more positive about themselves than male under-achievers. However, this was not observed in females".

Females also tend to "attribute any success to luck (external cause) rather than to ability (internal cause) as males do" (Scerri, 1989; 17). This view prohibits girls from learning. According to Robinson - Awana (1986), "a pupil's belief in his control over destiny is more important to achievement than any other school factor measured".

Ventura (1982) and Darom (1988) state that it is the teacher's role to exclude "sex stereotype expectations" in the classroom, in order to avoid a self-fulfilling prophecy.

#### **2.4.2. Age.**

According to Burns (1982), students between the ages of 6 and 11, show a higher level of self-esteem than students during their early adolescent (12 to 14 years) period. This may be attributed to the fact that adolescents are in the middle of a period of development which is full of uncertainty and confusion.

caused by physical and emotional changes..

### 2.4.3. Family structure and Socio-economic status.

Song and Hattie (1984) have indicated that family structure and economic/social class influence "family psychological characteristics such as encouragement and expectations of parents and educational activities at home" (Scerri, 1989; 18). In addition, their research proposed that family size has an indirect impact on family psychological characteristics. Furthermore, "family psychological characteristics can also indirectly affect academic attainment due to its impact on general, social and academic self-esteem" (Scerri, 1989; 19).

- i) **Family Size.** According to Coopersmith (1967), there is no significant relationship between family size and self-esteem. However, other studies have indicated the opposite.

Hetherington and Parke (1975) have found that as the size of the family increases, the children suffer because they do not receive enough time and attention from parents, and therefore do not develop "inherited intellectual capabilities" (Scerri, 1989; 20). Furthermore, crowding and economic pressures may create increased stresses within the family. Sears (1970) reported that the larger the family unit, the poorer the self-esteem. "The evidence on family size is consistent with the view that small families are conducive to the development of a high self-esteem" (Scerri, 1989; 19).

- ii) **Socio-economic status** Another significant variable which affects the development of self-esteem involves the socio-economic status of parents. The socio-economic status has a significant effect on the psychological characteristics of the individuals in the family. According to Song and Hattie (1984), these psychological characteristics have the greatest influence on general self-esteem. This is in part due to the fact that the confidence of the individual and physical self-esteem are more influenced by issues at home than are social self-esteem or academic self-esteem.

According to the Plowden report (1967), a significant relationship was detected between the parents social status and attainment. Marsh et al (1984) reported a "high correlation between self-esteem and attainment in high socio-economic status schools". An explanation for this significant correlation stems from the greater value on achievement from higher social status parents. Furthermore, these parents maintain an expected standard of achievement, provide feedback on failures or successes and offer advice in order to obtain success.

Studies have also indicated that middle-class and working-class parents have different values and practices in their child-rearing tactics, and boys are more affected than girls. Burns (1982) reports that boys from a high social class are more likely to have higher levels of self-esteem than boys from a low social class. However, this significant difference is almost non-existent between high class girls and low class girls. It appears that middle-class fathers give more support to their sons than that offered by working-class fathers. Furthermore, little or no support is offered to their daughters.

Morly (1964) attempts to explain the problem which causes lower socio-economic status students to underestimate their achievement capabilities. At school, students are exposed to material and tasks which "are inconsistent with the values of their culture. When as a consequence, their work is not up to standard, they are induced to believe that they are failures. Once convinced of this, it is difficult for them to succeed" (Scerri, 1989; 23).

However, some researchers have found no significant relationship between social class and self-esteem. Paschal (1968) reported no correlation exists between paternal socio-economic status, maternal occupation or lack of it and the child's self-esteem.

# CHAPTER 3

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REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

## CHAPTER 3

### REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The main objective of this chapter is to focus specifically, on academic achievement as a source of self-esteem. In particular, this chapter seeks to:

- i. determine what factors link self-esteem and academic achievement
- ii. determine the role of significant others on a person's self-esteem in a scholastic context.
- iii. investigate the impact that self-esteem has on one's performance and one's reactions to success and failure.

#### **3.2 An overview of the relationship between attainment and self-esteem.**

A four-year old child already has a fairly firm idea of his self-worth based on the feedback he had received until then from his parents and significant others. Hence, when a child starts to attend school, he already has a predisposition towards success or failure. However, this self-concept can still be modified by the challenges and happenings which a child encounters daily at school.

In fact, school experience may enhance or disrupt the self-concept which was in the process of being formed. This results from the increased independence which a child starts to enjoy, and from the continuous and systematic evaluation which emphasizes the child's own performance. Such evaluation does not

depend solely on grading and examinations; feedback from teachers and peers cannot be avoided. As Burns (1982) pointed out: "Most pupils face daily reminders of their potentials and limitations; rewards, punishments, success and failure are on offer on a lavish scale". (R. Burns, p.202).

A child experiences failure and success before he starts to attend school but the classroom makes his achievements official, in the sense that a record is kept of his progress. What makes this an even more challenging task is the fact that children cannot choose to do things which interest them or which they are good at. Thus, the high or low self-esteem which soon becomes apparent in school develops from the child's psychological experiences at home. However, experiences at school do exert an influence on this self-concept, especially as pupil's efforts are continuously measured by academic standards.

### **3.3 Feedback from significant others in a scholastic environment**

Feedback from teachers and their aura of expertise and from peer groups bombards the pupil through verbal and non-verbal means. It can reinforce, both positively and negatively, the pupil's behaviour and his view of himself. Feedback also makes an impact on what teachers and peers expect from the individual.

This interplay between feedback, self-esteem, expectations and achievement results in a virtuous or a vicious circle, as the case may be. A child who has a positive outlook of himself will perform adequately. The teacher's perception of that child will thus be a favourable one. This, in turn, will continue to enhance the pupil's self-esteem. Thus, a pupil's positive self-esteem will be reinforced by the

teacher's expectations and feedback. On the other hand, a child who views himself negatively, will not regard himself as being capable of doing well at school. His performance in the class will be in accordance with this opinion. Most probably, the teacher will not regard him favourably. When the pupil notices this reaction from the teacher, he starts to think even more poorly of himself. One cannot determine which variable initiates this circular process. What is certain is the fact that all these factors influence each other mutually.

Hence, although a four-year old child already has a primary self-esteem derived from his parents' feedback and expectations, the teacher can still mould this self-esteem differently through the feelings which are conveyed to the child. It is not yet clear who is the crucial significant other - the parents or the teacher. What is evident is the considerable influence which the teacher has over the pupil's self-esteem and academic attainment.

Some teachers underestimate the impact which they have on the child as the latter develops his self-concept. Staines (1958) was the pioneer researcher to demonstrate that as teachers work towards achieving particular academic standards, they can also gradually affect significant changes in the pupil's view of themselves, particularly through their comments on the pupil's abilities, attainments, status, and self-confidence.

Many remarks in the classroom are made without previously pondering on how potent a comment may be. Ensor (1976) observed teacher-pupil dyadic interactions in four classrooms. In each classroom, two groups of pupils were identified according to the pupils' level of self-concept of ability. Children with a high self-concept of ability enjoyed more favourable communications and a more

positive evaluation by their teachers. Those having a low self-concept of ability received more criticism by their teachers.

A mark awarded by a teacher is often equated by the pupil with what he believes the teacher thinks of him as an individual. Moreover pupils tend to accept teachers' judgements and come to behave in accordance with these expectations. These factors demonstrate that feedback from significant others within the scholastic environment is one major reason why academic achievement and self-esteem are so strongly interlinked.

### **3.4 The Emphasis on Academic Achievement.**

Children have to contend with two different curricula. One is explicit, formal and academic. Pupils who perform well are rewarded by the school's value systems, while low achievers are either unrewarded, irrespective of their efforts, or else rewarded for behaviour other than academic achievement. The other school curriculum is the implicit one, whereby the pupil learns what the others think of him and develops his own self-perception through his interaction with teachers, peers and parents. The implicit curriculum is characterised by the continuous judgement of the pupil by these parties. These judgements are often based on comparisons and relative performance since competition is a central feature of the educational system.

A child must cope with success or inadequacy on a daily basis, as he tries to work out the tasks assigned in class. Hence, it is inevitable that educational experiences have a major impact on a child's self-esteem. Successful pupils tend to develop positive self-concepts. However unsuccessful school

experiences increase the likelihood of developing a negative self-concept. In his book "Schools without Failure" (1969) Glasser criticised this excess emphasis which is placed on academic material, especially as other skills are put aside. Many researchers also criticise the use of marks, competition between children and fear of failure as a means of motivating children. This only helps to generate a low self-esteem.

As teachers and parents exercise pressure on children to reach higher academic standards, children start to regard academic achievement as an important index of self-worth. In fact Bardwick (1971) remarked that the child's efforts to attain success is that child's striving for self-esteem. However, this system of continuous assessment and competition makes the child feel helpless, frustrated and incapable. In fact, Morse (1964) found a consistent decline in children's self-esteem between the second and seventh school years. Apparently, the longer that children are exposed to constant evaluations based on academic attainment, the greater the probability that they will consider themselves as failures. Thus, a child will increasingly use his academic attainments as a yardstick with which to measure his overall self-worth.

### **3.5 Research focusing on self-esteem and attainment.**

Prior to the 1950s, psychologists and educators were so engrossed with the newly developed intelligence measurement tests, that they did not carry out a systematic study of the factors which influenced a child's performance at school. However, the awareness that academic achievement cannot be considered in a vacuum, continued to increase. The writings of Combs (1965) and Jersild (1952) in America and Staines (1958) in Britain on their research concerning classroom

practices, helped to emphasize the role of the self-concept, both as an influence on and as an outcome of the performance of the pupil and the teacher. As a result, various investigations were undertaken to examine the relationship between self-esteem and academic attainment.

When comparing the overall conclusions of these studies it is important to keep in mind certain variables which differ among them, namely:

- i. the number of students in the sample and their age;
- ii. whether the school involved in the study is coeducational or not;
- iii. the social background and academic ability of the students.

It is also important to note that these studies utilize different statistical techniques. In fact some studies use the chi-square test of independence while others have employed the product moment correlation method. A selection of studies from the myriad of investigations which have been carried out is cited below. Unfortunately, many of the research studies concerning self-esteem and academic achievement, concentrated on older children attending secondary schools.

### **3.6 Review of investigations which made use of the product moment correlation method.**

Some of these investigations focused on the relationship between global self-esteem and academic achievement. Among these studies, one can mention that which was carried out by Bachman in 1966. In a national sample of 2213 boys attending the tenth grade of American public high schools, Bachman found a correlation of 0.23 between the self-esteem scores based on Rosenberg's

Self-Esteem Scale and the examination results which these students achieved in the ninth grade. This correlation became 0.48 when Bachman focused on the relationship between self-concept of schoolwork activity and self-reported grades.

The relationship between global self-esteem and academic achievement was also investigated by Simon and Simon (1975). In this case, the sample included 87 students (45 male and 42 female) aged between 10 and 12 years of age. These American students first completed the Scientific Research Associates' Achievement series which included the following subjects: science, arts, language, reading, mathematics and social studies. This series does not only yield a percentile for each of these subtests, it also yields a composite percentile based upon national norms. Afterwards, these students also completed Coopersmith's (1967) Self-Esteem Inventory. These two scores, i.e., the composite percentiles on the SRA attainment series and the scores obtained from the self-esteem inventory, were then used by the researchers to calculate the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. This study indicated a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and academic attainment. In fact, the correlations between SEI scores and SRA scores resulted to be 0.33 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

The positive and significant correlation between the individual's global self-esteem and his/her academic achievement was also reported by other researchers, such as Bachman and O'Malley (1977) who based their study on a sample of 1600 students who attended high school. Chang (1976) also found a significant relationship between the teachers' ratings of the child's self-concept and the child's educational success, while Ellerman (1980) found a generally negative self-concept in Australian primary children who did not do well at school.

The studies cited so far investigated the relationship between academic achievement and global self-concept. However this relationship becomes more pronounced when one applies measures of academic self-concept rather than measures of self-concept in general. The major measure of specific academic achievement is Brookover's Self-Concept of Ability Scale which was used by Brookover and his colleagues (1964) when they carried out a longitudinal programme. For this study, Brookover et al selected 1050 13-year-old students (513 males and 537 females). Only white students were included in this study to eliminate any influences which ethnic differences may have on the relation between academic self-esteem and attainment. The Self-Concept of Ability Scale was administered in two parallel forms: the first was designed to measure self-concept of ability in general; the second, to measure academic self-esteem in 4 specific subject areas - mathematics, science, English and social studies. The grade point average in these subjects was used as an index of academic performance.

The first hypothesis which was tested by Brookover, Thomas and Patterson (1964) was that there is significant and positive relationship between academic self-esteem and the academic performance of students, even when the students' IQ has been controlled. Product-moment correlations between the grade point average and general academic self-concept were then calculated. These correlations resulted to be +0.42 for boys and +0.39 for girls. Thus, even when the ability dimension is controlled, self-concept of ability in school and academic attainment are positively and significantly correlated.

The second hypothesis was concerned with whether specific self-concepts which

correspond to specific subject matters are better predictors of attainment than the academic self-concept in general. This test involved the computation for the two sexes of the correlations between:

- i. the academic self-esteem in general and the students' grades in mathematics, science, English and social studies
- ii. the specific self-esteem of ability and the students' attainment in these subjects.

The specific self-concept of ability correlations resulted to be significantly higher than the general self-concept of ability for males in mathematics, science and social studies, and for females in social studies. With regards to the English subject, it was the correlation between the academic self-esteem in general and attainment which had the higher value, although the difference was of insignificant magnitude. From this, one can conclude that specific self-concepts of ability for specific subject matters differ from the general self-concept of ability and are significantly better predictors of attainment in some, but not all, subjects.

The authors also investigated whether academic self-esteem is positively and significantly correlated with the evaluation that one perceives significant others have of oneself. This hypothesis was tested by asking the students to list the people whom they consider to be important in their lives. Four people who were commonly found in these students' lists were their mother, father, favourite teacher, and best friend. Hence, this study focused on these parties as significant others. Product-moment correlations for the student's general academic self-esteem and the evaluations that he perceived each of these

significant others have of his ability, were then computed. The resulting correlations were all quite high, indicating that there is a significant and positive correlation between these two variables. However, it is the composite image which appears to be most closely correlated with the student's academic self-esteem, rather than the images of specific others, since the highest correlation was that for a composite of the perceived images of all significant others.

The conclusions arrived at by Brookover et al (1964) were reinforced by Jones and Grieneeks (1970). The latter also examined the relationship between self-perception and academic achievement. The study by Jones and Grieneeks (1970) tried to determine whether self-perception is the most reliable predictor of academic achievement, and what is the most valid measure of self-perception. The sample in this study included 877 students (411 females and 466 males) at college level.

These students were asked to fill various measures of self-perception, namely:

- i. Self-Expectations Inventory whose items were concerned with behaviour relevant to scholastic attainment
- ii. the 'Who am I' technique whereby one can detect the student's awareness of his identity from that student's answer to this question.
- iii. Self-Concept of Ability Scale which measures the student's evaluation of his own academic ability.

On the other hand, academic achievement was measured by a Scholastic Aptitude Test and by grade point average (i.e. the mean of all a student's grade in the 1967 semester).

The correlations between these two variables indicated that there is a positive relationship between academic attainment and self-perception, irrespective of how the latter is measured. However, the self-concept of ability measure proved to be the best predictor of academic attainment.

Kifer (1973) emphasized the effect which teachers' judgements may have on the students' self-esteem of ability. His study was aimed to investigate what type of cumulative effect such judgements have on the students' academic self-esteem. Since Kifer was interested in the cumulative effect, he followed the relationship between academic self-concept and the marks awarded by the teachers over grades 1 to 8 (pupils of 5 to 13 years of age). To investigate this relationship, Kifer selected 5 bright pupils and 5 low-ability pupils from each class. The ability of these students was assessed on the basis of the teacher's marks, whereas their academic self-esteem was arrived at after the students completed Brookover's Self-Concept of Ability Scale.

For each grade, the academic self-esteem of successful and unsuccessful students were compared. At the end of grade 2, the difference between the self-esteem of ability for the two groups was only minimal. However, this difference continued to increase over the years until it became very marked at the end of grades 6 and 8.

Correlational procedures were also employed to determine the relationship

between academic self-esteem and the teachers' judgements. In this case, all the students in grades 5 and 7 (10 to 12 years old) were involved, not just the extreme students. Kifer reported that the correlation between teachers' marks and academic self-esteem is +0.23 at grade 5 and + 0.50 at grade 7. Thus, a main implication of this study is that the more feedback that a student receives from grades, teachers, parents and peers, regarding his academic ability, the larger the probability that his academic self-esteem will predict (and determine) his academic attainment.

Edgar et al (1974) considered another aspect of the academic self-esteem. This study examined the relationship between self acceptance and peer acceptance on self-esteem. The sample was selected from an Australian high school and included 107 students (46 males and 61 females) who were between 13 and 14 years of ages.

Coopersmith's (1967) self-esteem inventory was used to measure the students' self-esteem. The 'Guess Who' questionnaire was then used to measure peer acceptance (i.e. the student's status among his peers) and self acceptance (i.e. the student's own perception of this status). This questionnaire which includes 17 items, requires that students give a list of names of the students in their form. The students were then asked to write those names, including their own, against the item which particularly describes that person. Nine items were of a positive evaluation whereas the remaining eight items had a more negative tone. Peer and self acceptance were then calculated as the difference between the positive and negative evaluations of the peers and of the self. The students' attainment was based on the aggregate school mark for the first semester.

All these measurements were used in the computation of correlations between 5 self-esteem scales - general, social, home, academic, and total - and the peer acceptance, self acceptance and academic achievement. Peer acceptance resulted to be significantly correlated only with social self-esteem, whereas self-acceptance appeared to have a significant relationship with general, social, and total self-esteem. Academic attainment was found to be significantly correlated to all aspects of self-esteem except for home self-esteem.

### **3.7 Review of investigations which made use of the chi-square technique.**

The most prominent study which made use of this technique was carried out in California by Fink (1962). The students who were involved in this study were 15 years of age and had an IQ in the range of 90 to 100. The grade point average (based on all the marks earned by the student in the ninth grade) was computed as a measure of each student's academic attainment. The students were then divided into two subgroups: those whose grade point average were above the median grade point average were considered as achievers, whereas those who had a grade point average lower than the median were considered as underachievers. Ultimately each achiever and underachiever of the same sex were paired together. In all, the sample involved in this study included 20 pairs of males and 24 pairs of females. The students' self-esteem was assessed on the basis of:

- i. three personality tests
- ii. a personal data sheet
- iii. an essay describing "What I will be in 20 years".

Three psychologists had the task of assessing the adequacy or inadequacy of the students' self-esteem on the basis of this data. The chi-square test was performed on the combined ratings made by the psychologists of the students' self-esteem and their attainment. A strong relationship between self-esteem and attainment emerged from this study, especially in the case of males who tend to focus more on achievement than females to acquire self-esteem.

### **3.8 Research carried out with the Maltese context**

Scerri set out to construct an instrument, specific to the Maltese context, which measures self-esteem in adolescents. She also investigated any relationship between self-esteem measures and a number of variables, namely, attainment in particular curriculum subjects, family size, birth order, parents' occupations, and the student's age.

For this study, a sample of 1595 students (694 males and 901 females) was selected from Forms 2, 3 and 4, that is the students' age ranged from 13 to 15 years. This sample made up 24% of the total student population in junior lyceums and area secondary schools for the three year groups as on June 1988. The classes to be involved in this study were chosen in such a way so as to ensure a representative distribution of the whole range of ability.

The students were given a self-esteem inventory, made up of 60 statements. For each statement the students indicated if that statement applied to them or not by making a tick in the Yes or No column respectively. They also had to fill in some personal information concerning their age, family size, birth order and parental occupation. This inventory was based on that of Coopersmith (1967) and Battle

(1981). However, in the Maltese study, the inventory was completed anonymously although an indexing system was used to be able to arrive at the respondents' identity. The author assumed that students would answer more truthfully if they answered the questionnaire anonymously.

The 60 items of this inventory measured the individual's perception in four areas of self-esteem: general, academic, social and home, together with the student's defensiveness. The self-esteem score was obtained by adding the number of items for each scale which indicate a high self-esteem. The scores for these subscales were totalled to obtain a total self-esteem score. The students' academic achievement was measured on the basis of the raw scores obtained in Maltese, English, mathematics and integrated science/physics in the national examinations for each Form held in June 1988. The subjects were chosen due to the emphasis they receive in secondary school curriculum.

This data was analysed using both the chi-square technique and the Bravais - Pearson correlation method to enable comparisons with the finding of foreign studies. Both statistical methods yielded the same results. That is, the results of this study do not depend on the statistical method which is used to analyse the data. Scerri found a significant positive correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement, but this relationship varied with age:

- i. for 13-year-old students, positive correlations were found between attainment and the general, academic, home and total self-esteem.
- ii. for 14-year-old students, positive correlations were found between attainment and the academic, home and total self-esteem.

- iii. for 15-year-old students, a positive correlation was found only for academic self-esteem and attainment.

Thus, the most reliable prediction of attainment for all the age groups is the student's academic self-esteem.

### **3.9 Self-Esteem as a Prediction of Achievement and Ability.**

The impact of educational achievement on the child's self-esteem is not only restricted to how that child views his academic ability. For instance, the positive perception that high achievers will internalize of themselves will help them develop satisfactory relationships with peers, teachers and parents. In turn, this continues to enhance the children's motivation to approach their school tasks with more confidence.

Hence, self-esteem can be regarded as a predictor of academic performance. However one should note here that self-esteem is only one of a number of variables which affect this performance. Various research reveal this ability to predict achievement on the basis of a child's score in a self-esteem inventory. However, the resulting correlations, which have a magnitude in the range of +0.20 and +0.50, indicate that self-esteem has an important but not an overwhelming influence. Hence, self-esteem must be ranged alongside IQ, social class, family interest, and other factors to be able to explain the success or failure of a child.

An interesting study, which was carried out by Wattenberg and Clifford (1964), showed that self-esteem can be used to predict a child's performance even when the child is of a very young age. The authors measured the intelligence, ego

strength and reading ability of 128 pupils when they were in Kindergarten and when they finished the second grade. The measures of self-concept and ego strength were more reliable in their prediction of the pupils' reading abilities two years later than were measures of intelligence.

### **3.10 Reactions to Success and Failure**

The usefulness of taking self-esteem into consideration when analyzing an individual's ability and performance, becomes evident when one tries to predict an individual's reactions to success or failure.

Weiner (1971) suggested that high and low self-concept children give different weights to ability, difficulty of task, luck and effort to explain their success or failure. Luck and effort are usually used to explain unexpected success or failure, whereas success or failure which is expected or which is consistent with past experience is usually explained by ability and difficulty of task.

When people with low self-esteem are successful, this may hinder them rather than help their performance to improve. In an experiment carried out by Maracek and Mettee (1972), when low self-esteem students were successful in a particular task and were led to believe that such success was due to their own personal skill, they felt uncomfortable. This episode did not encourage them to improve their performance afterwards. On the other hand, when these students' success was attributed to luck, they were more personally satisfied.

Ames and Felker (1979) observed how a group of 156 children reacted to success and failure. High self-concept children took credit for their success but the low-esteem children tended to explain this success through luck, which

explanation generates minimum positive self-feelings. Surprisingly all children, irrespective of their self-perception, explained their failure through their lack of skills, but low self-esteem children criticized themselves more. An important implication of this and similar studies is the fact that if one tries to modify an individual's low self-esteem, one must essentially change this individual's interpretation of success and failure.

### **3.11 Conclusion.**

It is evident that self-esteem and academic achievement are closely linked to each other. Children regard their academic success or failure as a measure of their adequacy or inadequacy as a whole person. Feedback from teachers and fellow students also leave their mark on the child's self-esteem.

Children who have a negative view of their academic abilities tend to fulfill this prediction and are not successful in their academic tasks. By contrast, children who have a more positive appraisal of their ability to perform in school and of their abilities in general have their self-perception continuously reinforced and tend to do much better. Purkey (1970) rightly concluded that "overall the research evidence clearly shows a persistent and significant relationship between the self-concept and academic achievement" (W.W. Purkey, p.15).

# CHAPTER 4

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## RESEARCH DESIGN

## CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH DESIGN

### 4.1 Introduction.

The objectives of this study were to:

- i. investigate the relationship, if any, between self-esteem measures and academic achievement.
- ii. determine if self-esteem measures and family size, birth order, parents' occupations and the pupil's age are related.

### 4.2 Description of the Sample.

The sample consisted of 12 students of whom 36 (50%) were girls and 36 (50%) were boys. Table 4.1 illustrates the breakdown of pupils' sex and year level.

**Table 4.1 Distribution of Sample by sex and year level**

Year	Male	Female	Total
3	16 (44%)	20 (56%)	36 (50%)
4	20 (56%)	16 (44%)	36 (50%)
Total	36 (100%)	36 (100%)	72 (100%)

The sample represents approximately 24% of the total number of pupils attending Year 3 and Year 4 at the school under investigation as on January 1996.

The school in question is located in a village in the southern part of Malta. It caters mainly to pupils who come from a working class background. It is considered to be one of the largest schools in Malta, hence it is divided into two sections: Primary 'A' (which involves Years 1, 2 and 3) and Primary 'B' (which involves Years 4, 5 and 6). There are 6 classes for each year group.

In order to obtain our sample we considered all Year 3 and all Year 4 classes (12 classes in total). All of these classes are of mixed ability and pupils are streamed according to date of birth. Each teacher was asked to select 6 pupils from his/her class; 3 who they considered to be high achievers and 3 of a lower ability.

The average age of the Year 3 pupils is 7 while that of the Year 4 pupils is 8.

### **4.3 Research Instrument.**

In order to investigate the issue of self-esteem in Maltese school children we considered the instrument developed by Josianne Scerri (1989), as this was specifically designed for the Maltese context. However the study abovementioned was aimed at the adolescents' age group and thus was not suitable for our sample.

Hence we devised an instrument to determine self-esteem in school children according to their level of understanding. The 14 questions devised were in relation to home, academic and social self-esteem and the responses given were utilized to produce an overall or global picture of self-esteem.

Prior to our investigation, a pilot-test was conducted on 5 pupils to ensure that the

questions were clear, concise and understood by all levels of ability. The pupils of our pilot-test experienced no difficulty with the survey. Therefore, we advanced to the actual implementation of our study.

Prior to the administration of the survey, we asked each teacher to select the top 3 high-achievers and 3 low-achieving pupils. Teachers were asked to consider presentation of work, class tests and overall academic ability when making their choice. Teachers of Year 4 classes also utilized the grades obtained by pupils in their half-yearly examinations as guidelines. The following table illustrates the number of boys and girls included in the sample according to their academic ability:

**Table 4.2 Distribution of sample by sex and ability.**

	Male	Female	Total
High-ability	13 (36%)	23 (64%)	36 (50%)
Low-ability	23 (64%)	13 (36%)	36 (50%)
Total	36 (100%)	36 (100%)	72 (100%)

The survey was administered on an individual basis. The pupils were informed individually that the questionnaire was not an exam and that there were no right or wrong answers. We then asked the questions, one by one, to each pupil and their answers were recorded.

## **4.4. Collection of Data**

### **4.4.1 Biographical Data**

Prior to the actual administration of the self-esteem questionnaire, students were

asked a total of 9 questions concerning their home and personal life. We recorded their year group and sex and then asked them:

- i. their date of birth
- ii. family size
- iii. number of older and younger siblings
- iv. father's occupation
- v. mother's occupation.

Only some of this information was utilized in analysing the relationship between self-esteem and the other variables which have previously been mentioned.

#### **4.4.2 Self-Esteem Questionnaire**

After obtaining this preliminary biographical information, students were asked to answer 14 questions which would enable the investigators to obtain measures of each individual child's level of self-esteem. These questions reflect the children's self-perception regarding their academic ability, relationship with peers and their family, and their self-image. (See Appendix 1).

#### **4.4.3 Measures of Self-Esteem**

A self-esteem score for each child was obtained by adding the number of statements for which the child's answers indicate a high self-esteem. When no answer was given for a particular statement, this was considered to indicate a low self-esteem. If the subject responded in the affirmative to the following questions, this implied a high level of self-esteem. However, if the subject gave a negative

response then it was deemed to reflect a low self-esteem. The questions are as follows:

3. *It-tfal l-oħra jhobbu jilgħabu miegħi.* (The other children like to play with me).
5. *Nieħu gost meta t-teacher toħrogni quddiem sħabi biex inwieġeb xi mistoqsija.* (I like it when the teacher asks me to go out in front of the class to answer a question).
6. *It-teacher dejjem tgħidli li jien bravu fl-iskola.* (The teacher always tells me that I am intelligent).
8. *Nieħu gost m'ommi u missieri.* (I have fun with my mum and dad).
9. *Jien bravu/brava fl-iskola.* (I am smart).
10. *Meta nħares lejn il-mera, naħseb li jien sabiħ/sabiħa bħal tfal oħra.* (When I look in the mirror, I think that I am beautiful/handsome like the other children).
12. *Il-ġenituri tiegħi iħobbuni.* (My parents love me).

The remainder of the questions required a negative response, in order to detect high levels of self-esteem. In the cases where affirmative responses were given, it was indicative of low self-esteem. The questions are as follows:

1. *L-iskool work li ttina t-teacher insibu tqil.* (I find the school work which is given by the teacher to be difficult).
2. *Hafna tfal huma iktar bravi minni fl-iskola.* (Many children are more intelligent than I am).
4. *Ommi u missieri ma tantx iħobbuni għax m'inhix tajjeb fl-iskola.* (My mother and father do not love me because I am not good at school).
7. *Jien niddejjaq l-iskola meta:*
  - *nkun irrid nagħmel is-somom*
  - *nkun irrid naqra bl-Ingliż*
  - *nkun irrid naqra bil-Malti*

(I do not like it when:

  - I have to do maths homework
  - I have to read in English
  - I have to read in Maltese).
11. *Jien m'għandix ħafna ħbieb.* (I do not have a lot of friends).

#### 4.4.4 Measures of Academic Achievement

As has been mentioned beforehand, we selected the pupils for our sample on the basis of the teachers' suggestions regarding who are the high- and low-achievers in each class. The teachers were urged to base their decisions on the global achievement of the pupils, rather than focusing on attainment in a particular area.

When we were conducting the study, the results of the Year 4 half-yearly examinations had just been issued. Thus the Year 4 teachers based their decisions on the total scores obtained in Mathematics, English, Maltese, Religion and Social Studies. The Year 3 pupils are not formally assessed through examinations. Hence in this case, the teachers made a decision on the basis of their continuous assessment of the pupils.

Each questionnaire was coded so as it immediately conveyed to us whether the pupil concerned is of a high-ability or low-ability.

#### **4.4.5 Variables**

Therefore, we obtained the following details:

- i. sex
- ii. date of birth
- iii. family size
- iv. birth order
- v. father's occupation
- vi. mother's occupation
- vii. student's academic ability
- viii. self-esteem score

# CHAPTER 5

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## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The data collected was analyzed to determine whether there is any relationship between:

- i. students' self-esteem and their academic achievement
- ii. self-esteem and gender
- iii. self-esteem and age
- iv. self-esteem and father's occupation
- v. self-esteem and family size.

The sample under investigation is too small to enable us to derive statistically significant conclusions. Due to our limitations in time and resources, we have confined ourselves to eyeballing the data only, the results of which are presented in this chapter.

For the purposes of our analysis we classified self-esteem scores in 3 main categories. Pupils who obtained a self-esteem score in the range of 1 to 4 were considered to have a low self-esteem. Those whose score was in the range of 5 to 10 were considered to have an average self-esteem, while the other pupils whose self-esteem score varied between 11 and 14 were considered to have a high self-esteem.

#### **5.2 Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement.**

First we carried out a global analysis, that is for both Year 3 and Year 4 together,

between the pupils' self-esteem scores and academic achievement, and we obtained the following results:

**Table 5.1 Relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement for the whole sample.**

Self-Esteem Scores	High-Ability	Low-Ability
low score 1 - 4	nil	17
average score 5 - 10	nil	19
high score 11 - 14	36	nil

Clearly all high-ability pupils reported a high self-esteem. Low-ability pupils seem to have a low or average self-esteem. The following pie-chart can help to visualize and appreciate the relationship between academic ability and self-esteem:



When we subdivided our analysis according to the year group, we found a similar division in terms of the relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem.

**Table 5.1a Relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement for Year 3.**

YEAR 3		
Self-Esteem Scores	High Ability	Low Ability
low score 1 - 4	nil	5
average score 5 - 10	nil	13
high score 11 - 14	18	nil

**Table 5.1b Relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement for Year 4.**

YEAR 4		
Self-Esteem Scores	High Ability	Low Ability
low score 1 - 4	nil	12
average score 5 - 10	nil	6
high score 11 - 14	18	nil

For each year group, all high-ability pupils reported to have a high self-esteem. The majority of the Year 3 low-ability pupils were indicative of an average self-esteem while most low-ability pupils in Year 4 seem to have a low self-esteem.

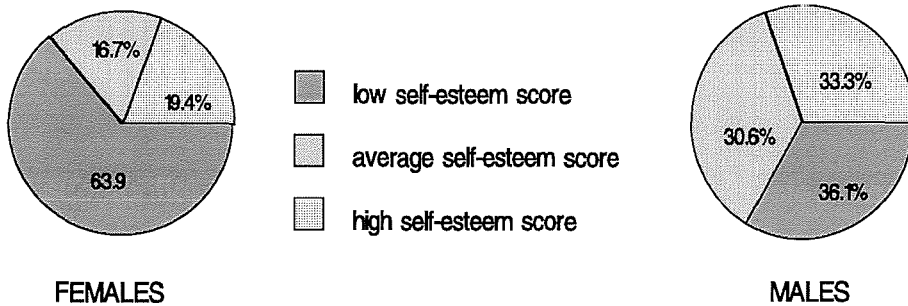
### **5.3. Self-esteem and gender**

The following table represents the differences uncovered during our investigation regarding gender and self-esteem when we consider a combination of Year 3 and Year 4 pupils:

**Table 5.2 Relationship between self-esteem and gender**

Self-Esteem Scores	Females	Males
Low score 1 - 4	6	11
average score 5 - 10	7	12
high score 11 - 15	23	13

Although a substantial number of males obtained a high self-esteem score, there appears to be a tendency for a greater number of girls to express a higher self-esteem score than boys. Furthermore, the girls underscored the boys in terms of low and average self-esteem. In order to exemplify the differences in gender and self-esteem, we have produced the following pie-chart:



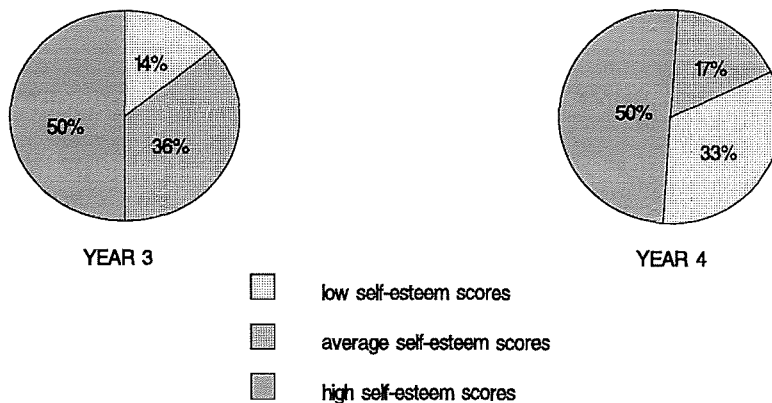
**5.4. Self-Esteem and Age.**

To obtain an indication of the influence which age may have on self-esteem, we tabulated the self-esteem scores which were reflected in the semi-guided interviews with Year 3 and Year 4 pupils. The following table represents our findings:

**Table 5.3 Relationship between self-esteem and age.**

Self-Esteem Scores	Year 3 (7 years of age)	Year 4 (8 years of age)
low score 1 - 4	5	12
average score 5 - 10	13	6
high score 11 - 14	18	18
Total	36	36

Although there appears to be little difference in terms of high self-esteem scores between Year 3 and Year 4 pupils, i.e. age, there appears to be a more significant difference with regards to low scores in self-esteem and age. In other words, average and high scores in self-esteem were more pronounced in the younger, Year 3 pupils (31 students out of a possible 36), as opposed to the older Year 4 pupils whose average and high scores in self-esteem were quite lower (24 out of a possible 36).



### **5.5 Self-Esteem and Family Size**

Families were divided into two categories:-

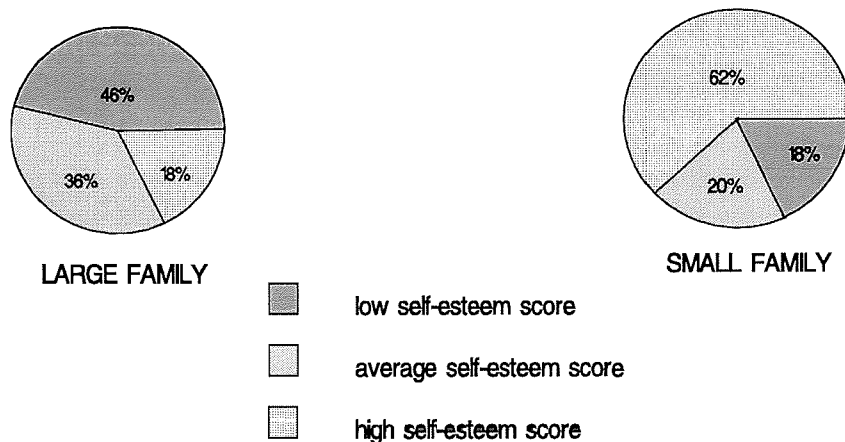
- i. small families: families consisting of 4 members or less
- ii. large families : families consisting of 5 members and over.

The following table demonstrates the relationship between family size and self-esteem scores in Year 3 and Year 4 pupils of our sample:

**Table 5.4 Relationship between self-esteem and family size.**

Self-Esteem Scores	Large Family	Small Family
low scores 1 - 4	13	8
average score 5 - 10	10	9
high score 11 - 15	5	27

Children who come from small families reflect a high score in self-esteem, while their peers who originate from larger families tended to score average and low on the self-esteem score. This data is reinforced in the presentation of the following pie-chart:



**5.6 Self-Esteem and Father's Occupation.**

The following table represents the relationship between parental occupation and

the children's self-esteem. For the purposes of this analysis, we classified occupations in two main categories:-

- i. Professional and Semi-professional
- ii. Manual.

**Table 5.5 Relationship between Self-Esteem and Father's occupation**

Self-Esteem Scores	Professional	Manual
low scores 1 - 4	2	20
average scores 5 - 10	2	22
high scores 11 - 14	18	8

There is a considerable difference in children's self-esteem scores and the nature of father's occupation. The following pie-chart illustrates this marked difference whereby children whose father is engaged in a professional or semi-professional job enjoy a high self-esteem, while children of manual workers tend to report a low or average self-esteem score.



## **5.7 Summary of Results.**

- i. A positive relationship was detected between academic achievement and self-esteem scores. Students with high academic ability tended to achieve high scores in self-esteem, whereas low-ability students tended to achieve low to average scores in self-esteem.
- ii. A larger proportion of females obtained a high self-esteem score, whereas our findings for males do not indicate any clear relationships. While an overwhelming 63.9% of females obtained a high score in self-esteem, the number of boys in each category is approximately the same. In fact, the percentage of boys in each category are in the range of 31% to 36%, therefore preventing us from tracing any correlation.
- iii. Although high self-esteem scores do not seem to be influenced by age, older primary pupils tend to report lower scores in self-esteem than their younger counterparts.
- iv. A positive relationship was detected between children's high scores in self-esteem and their father's professional or semi-professional occupation. Furthermore, children whose fathers maintain a manual line of employment generally reported a low or average self-esteem score.

- v. Students from a small family tend to report high scores in self-esteem, thus indicating an inverse or negative relationship between self-esteem and family size. The same inverse relationship exists for students residing in large families and self-esteem scores.

# CHAPTER 6

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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### 6.1. Discussion.

##### 6.1.1 Academic Achievement and Self-Esteem.

Findings on the relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem indicate that a positive relationship exists between the two variables. Similar results obtained by Fink (1962), Song and Hattie (1984) and Robinson-Awana et al (1986) found that a significant positive correlation exists between academic achievement and self-esteem.

The relationship between the two variables can be attributed by both the skill development approach and the self-enhancement theory. The skill development approach states that a "high self-esteem is primarily a consequence of academic attainment" (Scerri, 1989; 131). On the other hand, the self-enhancement theory states that academic performance is affected by the self-esteem variable. This indicates that a child with a high self-esteem tends to exhibit high academic achievement.

However, it is plausible to assume that the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement is reciprocal. High academic success tends to increase levels of self-esteem, while self-esteem is likely to "influence performance through expectations, higher motivation and level of persistence" (Scerri, 1989; 132).

### **6.1.2. Sex and Self-Esteem.**

Findings on the relationship between sex and self-esteem are quite diverse. According to Marsh et al (1984), no sex differences were found between sex and self-esteem, amongst American children. However, in Australia, Smith (1975) found that sex differences do exist, with boys displaying a higher self-esteem than girls. Furthermore, these sex differences were found to depend on age.

Findings for the present Maltese sample support the research which indicates that there are sex differences, with regards to self-esteem, however, our data indicates the opposite of foreign studies. Our study indicated that girls obtained higher self-esteem scores than boys. These results could be attributed to the fact that most Maltese girls are obedient and therefore, receive more praise than their male counterparts. However, due to the limitations of our study, we are unable to substantiate this claim.

### **6.1.3. Age and Self-Esteem**

Foreign studies, particularly that of Paschal, reported that no relationship was found between age and self-esteem. Other researchers, including Morse (1964), found that there was a negative correlation between age and self-esteem.

Negative relationships were found to exist between age and low self-esteem. This implies that as age increases, the child's self-esteem decreases. This decrease in self-esteem in older children can be attributed to a number of factors. Older student's academic work will be assessed and will determine how they will be streamed for the following year. Thus, students are faced with greater

academic demands. It could also be the case that "most students with increasing age, place less importance on academic competence and substitute it by some other more rewarding pursuit" (Scerri, 1989; 126).

#### **6.1.4 Family size and Self-Esteem.**

The results gathered by the present study, indicate a negative relationship between family size and self-esteem; i.e. the larger the family size, the lower the self-esteem scores and vice-versa. Other researchers, including Havighurst and Levine (1979) have indicated that a negative relationship between these two variables does exist. It was found that as family size increases, the parents are unable to allocate sufficient attention and time to each child. Furthermore, Burns (1979) stated that "more children means more competition for the sort of attention that induces a high self-esteem".

#### **6.1.5 Fathers' occupation and self-esteem.**

Our findings indicate that a positive relationship exists between fathers' occupation and self-esteem; i.e. students whose fathers maintain a professional or semi-professional occupation obtained high scores in self-esteem and vice versa. This finding supports the research results reported by Brookover et al (1964).

It has been suggested by foreign researchers that the relationship between fathers' occupation and self-esteem can be attributed to environmental factors. Bee (1975) and Hurlock (1978) have indicated that "parents of higher socioeconomic groups encourage their children to talk more and they convey the

message of love, trust and acceptance to their offspring". Research conducted by Edgar et al (1974) has found that self-esteem develops out of the above mentioned factors. Coopersmith (1967) supports the work of Bee (1975) and Hurlock (1978), however he adds another factor to their lists. He believes that "such parents set fairly strict and clear limits for the child's behaviour and these limits are applied consistently". This discipline is interpreted by the child as parental love and caring and this results in the enhancement of self-esteem.

On the other hand, fathers belonging to the manual and lower occupational categories tend to encourage "in their offspring anxiety, doubts about self-worth, low expectations about success and an inability to develop sound social relationships based on mutual respect" (Scerri, 1989; 130). Thus, these children develop a low self-esteem.

## **6.2. Conclusions**

It is evident that self-esteem is influenced by many factors within the context of the child's personal life and environment. It also appears that self-esteem is an important and vital part of any learning situation as it plays a crucial role in the conditions and outcomes of learning.

Due to the fact that self-esteem plays an important role in the educational development of children, it provides important implications for parents and teachers. Parents and educators need to appreciate the significant role and the quality of their relationships with their children/students. If parents and educators can enhance self-esteem in their children/students it will be easier for these children to believe in themselves. Children who possess higher levels of

self-esteem also feel more confident to develop their potentials, including their academic abilities.

# CHAPTER 7

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PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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## **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

### **7.1 Introduction**

Although this study is not intended to present statistically significant correlations between self-esteem and academic achievement, the data collected, reinforced by more statistically reliable studies, indicate that an educator cannot underestimate the impact which pressures exerted within the scholastic context have on a child's self-esteem. Academic attainment, a child's own perceptions of his/her ability, and the feedback provided by teachers and fellow students all leave their mark on a child's self-esteem. Although they are not the only factors which impinge on the self-esteem developed by a child, they still provide important implications to any educator who has the children's well-being at heart. Some factors which influence self-esteem may be outside the control of the teacher, such as family background or parental occupation. However each educator can do something to effectively enhance the student's self-esteem.

In this chapter we would like to give some suggestions with regards to how educators can help students to become their own source of encouragement, motivation and reward to overcome their feelings of inadequacy, and to perceive themselves in a more positive manner.

### **7.2. Enhancing Pupil's Self-Esteem**

Carl Rogers, whose client-centred therapy is a popular technique which deals with changes in self-esteem, said that, "the individual has within himself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his self-concepts, his attitudes, and

his self-directed behaviour - and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided". (C. Rogers, 1974; p.115). That is, if teachers are perceived to be caring and supportive, students would find it easier to direct their internal drive to their personal and academic development.

Apparently, the three conditions of Rogerian theory, namely empathy, unconditional positive acceptance, and genuineness, can be effectively employed by the teacher in his/her interaction with the pupils. Empathy involves reassuring the pupil that he/she is understood and is not alone. For a teacher to demonstrate unconditional positive regard to the students, he/she must show that each student is accepted as a significant other, in spite of any weaknesses or limitations which they may possess. This would make it easier for the students to acknowledge their strengths. On the other hand, genuineness implies that a teacher must be consistent in his/her response to the pupils' feelings. Thus, the pupils would feel more secure and at ease. Rogers promoted these three conditions as pre-requisites for personal growth and self-actualisation. However their use is not confined solely to counselling therapy. They can also be used to create a secure environment within the classroom which makes it easier for students to develop a positive self-perception.

Burns mentions other conditions which should prevail in the classroom if there is to be an effective interaction between the teacher and the students. These include the following:-

- i. It is important for the teacher to support the pupils. However this support must not take the form of imposed excessive help,

otherwise the pupils will not feel responsible for their accomplishments.

- ii. Pupils must be provided with a framework of accepted rules which gives them the opportunity to choose and make decisions. This framework guides the pupils in determining what is expected of them by the teacher. Thus, these limits help students to set more realistic goals for themselves. This condition not only encourages the development of a positive self-concept, but it is also a necessary pre-requisite that pupils in a democratic society are capable of making intelligent choices.
  
- iii. Each pupil must feel that he/she is competent. Teachers must view positively each student's abilities and must demonstrate to the students that they believe in their potentials. This will facilitate and stimulate students to develop their intellectual abilities.
  
- iv. Teachers have an important role: that of helping pupils set realistic goals. People who have a low self-esteem set unrealistic goals, which are either too high or too low, so that they always experience failure as a result (Kay 1972). On the other hand, when individuals who have a high self-esteem do not manage to reach their targets, they attribute this failure to external factors so as to protect their self-concept. Such distortions only serve to hinder long-term enhancement of self-esteem. Thus teachers can guide each pupil to set realistic goals. These goals will vary from one individual to the

other because they should relate to past performance. In this manner, it would be easier to attain these objectives and students would regard themselves in a more positive way.

- v. Apart from setting realistic goals, pupils must also evaluate themselves realistically. Children, especially, pass harsher judgements than adults. Very often children tend to be compared to other members of their peer group. Unfortunately, this may reinforce one's negative self-perception. Hence, it is much better to evaluate a child's performance on the basis of past evaluation. For instance, if a student remained at the bottom of the class but his/her performance reflects some improvement, this should be acknowledged and credit given for it. In other words, any improvement must be praised and encouraged.
- vi. Ultimately the pupil must become his/her own evaluator. One must learn to praise oneself. As Burns explains, "The more positive the terms a person can apply to himself derived from realistic performance, goals and evaluation, the more powerful a force it is for moulding a positive self-concept." (R. Burns, 1982, p.398).

Therefore educators can do their part in enhancing the self-esteem of the students which are entrusted to them, even though other variables, independent of the classroom environment, also play their part in moulding the students' self-concept.

### **7.3 Suggestions for Further Research**

This area of study proved to be a very interesting one, especially for those who believe in "educating the whole person". In the Maltese context, two studies investigated the relationship between self-esteem and attainment with regard to students attending secondary schools. However, one must keep in mind that self-esteem is formed at a very young age; the primary years are crucial. Through this study we tried to shed some light on the issue of self-esteem in primary children. However we hope that in the near future, more statistically reliable research is carried out in this area. Of specific interest would be:-

- i. determining whether the Maltese educational system actually promotes the development of a positive self-concept or not.
- ii. observe if teachers are aware of the influence they exert on children's self-esteem as they continuously interact with them, and what the teachers actually do to help students develop higher levels of self-esteem.
- iii. investigate further the relationship between self-esteem and gender in Maltese primary schools since the data collected showed a tendency for females to have higher levels of self-esteem whereas foreign studies mostly support the view that males report higher self-esteem scores.

# APPENDIX

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## **APPENDIX 1**

A copy of the semi-guided interview which was utilized during our investigation, and its translation into English.

Year	Data tat-Twelid
Tifel/Tifla	Daqs tal-familja
Aħwa akbar minnek	Aħwa iżgħar minnek
X'jagħmel il-missier	
Xogħol l-omm. Qabel iż-żwieġ	
Wara ż-żwieġ	

Dan MHUX eżami. L-ebda twegiba ma hija "tajba" jew "ħażina".

IVA

LE

1. L-ischool work li ffina t-teacher insibu tqil.
2. Hafna tfal huma iktar bravi minni fl-iskola.
3. It-tfal l-oħra iħobbu jilgħabu miegħi.
4. Ommi u missieri ma tantx iħobbuni għax m'inhix tajjeb fl-iskola.
5. Nieħu gost meta t-teacher toħroġni quddiem sħabi biexinwieġeb xi mistoqsija.
6. It-teacher dejjem tgħidli li jien bravu fl-iskola.
7. Jien niddejjaq l-iskola meta:
  - nkun irrid nagħmel is-somom
  - nkun irrid naqra bl-Ingliż
  - nkun irrid naqra bil-Malti
8. Nieħu gost m'ommi u missieri.
9. Jien bravu/brava fl-iskola.
10. Meta nħares lejn il-mera, naħseb li jien sabiħ/  
sabiħa bħal tfal oħra.
11. Jien m'għandix hafna ħbieb.
12. Il-ġenituri tiegħi iħobbuni.



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