

The Academic Self-concept of Adolescents Who Live in Disadvantaged Home Environments: A Life Orientation Perspective

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KEYWORDS Learning. Support. Academic Achievement. Adolescents. Self-concept

ABSTRACT An exploratory study on Black South African adolescents' academic self-concepts was undertaken in disadvantaged home environments where poverty, unemployment, single parenthood were prevalent. The purpose of the study was to find out whether there is a relationship between the academic self-concept and a disadvantaged home environment. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used in this study. A survey was done on 461 adolescents and concurrently twenty early and middle adolescents from disadvantaged home environments were purposely selected to participate in the qualitative part of the study. Findings indicated that a disadvantaged home environment does affect the academic self-concept of adolescents. Parental supervision does influence academic self-concept. Adolescents who stayed alone or with grandparent who were not supportive had a lower academic self-concept. An intervention model is proposed for educators working with adolescents in such environments.

INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this study disadvantaged home environment refers to homes that are characterized by physical structures that are not suitable for human habitation, lack of safe drinking water and poor ventilation (Saegert and Evans 2003: 573). Poverty and lack of resources for the enhancement of learning also characterized a disadvantaged home environment. Disadvantaged home environments are also characterized by divorce whereby lack of emotional support for children is evident (Kowaleski-Jones and Dunifon 2004: 4). According to Vandervalk et al. (2004: 292), children who grew up in families with a happy, harmonious parental marriage experienced fewer problems and a higher well-being than those from divorced or distressed families. Death of one or both parents may also cause a home environment to be disadvantaged. For an example the HIV/AIDS pandemic caused child-headed homes in Africa and a drastic increase in the number of orphans (Jackson 2002).

Drawing on the bio-ecological theory, the researchers looked at how the systems interacted and influenced one another in informal settlements or disadvantaged home environments

(Donald et al. 2007). In the micro-system, that is the family setting, they looked at how the material needs like books, relationships with family members and interaction affected the academic self-concept. In the meso, exo, chrono and macro systems these were looked into as outside systems that may have an indirect influence on the academic self-concept of an adolescent. Since the bio-ecological theory is about the interaction amongst the subsystems and the ripple effect thereof, the home environment cannot be studied in isolation to other subsystems, hence the choice of bio-ecological theory as a lens for this study.

The milieu and the culture into which a child is born are of major importance in the cognitive development of the child (Hurlock 1973: 188). The home, furniture, clothes, toys, care and education which form part of the milieu in which a child develops are all culturally determined (Vrey 1979: 6). According to Purkey and Stanley (1991: 35), the self-concept may be defined as the totality of a complex and dynamic system of learned beliefs. This suggests that the self-concept is not inherited but acquired through learning. As the child develops and gets experience through life and attributes meaning to various

situations, the self-concept is also shaped accordingly. Gerdes et al. (1988: 77) and Wolffe (2000) on the other hand define the self-concept as a composite image of what we think we are, what we think we can achieve and what we would like to be. The self-concept cannot exist in a vacuum. It is formed and developed in well defined areas which according to Grobler (1996: 20) include the relationship with others, the educational climate and the child's life world. The self-concept is about one's characteristics, qualities abilities and actions (Woolfolk 2001). For the purpose of this study, focus was on the academic self-concept. The academic self-concept may be defined as the 'who am I' academically or the picture which one has of himself/herself as far as performance is concerned in school related work. Bong and Skaalvik (2003) state that academic self-concept primarily indicates one's self-perceived ability within a given academic area. According to Shavelson's model, the academic self-concept is divided into self-concepts relating to subjects like Mathematics, English, Science and History (Shavelson et al. 1976). Although Shavelson's model points to certain specific subject, the current study looked at all subjects that learners do at school and how their academic self-concepts were shaped and influenced by their disadvantaged home environments. Since children spend a significant portion of their lives being evaluated in school classrooms, self-worth theory postulates that a key to developing and maintaining self-worth is to develop and maintain a positive academic self-concept.

Research by Wanjohi (1981: 88) indicates that deprived home environments normally lack stimuli for the intellectual development of the child. Furthermore the National Research Council (1993) indicated that adolescents from low-income families experience higher rates of poor physical health, mental disorders and depression. Some of these adolescents are likely to engage in delinquent acts, have early sexual intercourse, experience adolescent pregnancy and may be arrested and drop out of school. Furthermore, such adolescents are less likely to make a successful transition from school into post-secondary education. The socio-economic status is a contributory factor to academic achievement (Cassidy and Lynn 1991). Parents of low achievers do not normally give their children the necessary attention, individual support and

emotional care because they are more stressed due to lack of income and problems that emanate from the state of being poor (Baharudin and Luster 1998: 379). Furthermore research indicates that time spent with parents contribute to academic achievement in children (Muola 2010).

Children's immediate family environments are a potent source for cognitive stimulation and have important consequences for academic achievement (Menaghan and Parcel 1995: 69). The quality of parent-child relations in the home environment creates a favourable environment for learning. Baharudin and Luster (1998: 378) found that mothers with greater personal resources including high levels in self-esteem, intellectual ability and educational ability provided more support and guidance to their children. Moletsane and Bouwer (2000: 31) maintain that offering books early in children's lives sows the seed of literacy and this enhances a positive academic self-concept. On the contrary, lack of books may hinder the development of the academic self-concept.

A study conducted by Rice (1992: 126) on divorce, stepparents and blended families indicates that adolescents in the seventh, eighth and ninth grades had lowest grades and lowest occupational aspirations. Lowest grades in school were noticed during a period of readjustment especially after divorce. As school performance declines, the self-esteem also showed a decline. The emotional turmoil experienced by adolescents after divorce or remarriages and step parenting may lead to lower grades and low academic self-concept (Rice 1992: 130).

It is reasonable to expect parents who raise few children to be able to devote more time to them than those who raise many children. Menaghan and Parcel (1995: 73) found that the addition of new children to the family may overextend the existing parental resources and energy. Thus larger numbers of children may constrain parental nurturance and stimulation, with negative effects on the quality of children's home environments and on children's intellectual and behaviour outcomes (Menaghan and Parcel 1995: 73).

In a study conducted by Menaghan and Parcel (1995:73) findings revealed that employed mothers who terminated work and those who worked part-time contributed more to the development of their children's math skills and read-

ing ability. Such mothers had more time to assist their children with homework and other school related issues resulting in improved academic performance. Thus it is clear from the foregoing account that the presence of parents in the home plays a significant role in the academic performance of children.

RATIONALE

The rationale for conducting this study was mainly driven by the experiences of researchers who worked in schools for a number of years with learners from disadvantaged home environments. The schools are in a village that was surrounded by informal settlements. The learners' performance was worrisome to educators, and since the researchers were working as guidance counselors they pondered upon the problem of low throughput rate and embarked on an exploration of academic self-concepts of those adolescents who came from disadvantaged home environments. The study addressed the gap that exists in research in informal settlements learners' academic self-concepts. The research question for the study was *'Is there a relationship between a disadvantaged home environment and the academic self-concepts of adolescents?'* The aim of the study was to find out whether there is a relationship between a disadvantaged home environment and the academic self-concepts of adolescents. Secondly to explore how factors in a disadvantaged home affect the academic self-concepts of adolescents.

METHODS

The researchers used both quantitative for survey design and qualitative research for an in-depth study. The quantitative approach was used to get data from a larger sample size and the qualitative data the researchers needed an in-depth data to ensure that what was not addressed by quantitative data would be clarified. According to Creswell (2009: 214), concurrent embedded strategy for a mixed method data may be collected simultaneously. We used questionnaires as a quantitative data collection method in this study. For qualitative data collection the researchers used individual semi-structured interviews to collect data from twenty adolescents. For quantitative data the sample size was 461

grade 9 and grade 11 adolescents. These were purposely selected from the two schools in Hebron village in North West Province in South Africa. The area in which the sample population was drawn was characterized by poverty and unemployment and these are some of the attributes of disadvantaged home environments. (Questions for poverty or disadvantaged home backgrounds covered mainly physical needs such as clothes, food, books, issues pertaining to school uniforms, books, calculators, and school trips mainly educational excursions etc). For qualitative data unstructured interviews were conducted to 20 participants ten grade 9 and ten grade 11 learners respectively. Documents such as mark schedules were also used in order to get the academic performance of participants. Learners were chosen in terms of the disadvantage category of the home environment such as child-headed household, single parent, both parents and guardian and all were characterized by poverty and or unemployment and the information was obtained from the learners' profiles through the permission of the principal and the class teacher.

Instruments

For quantitative research a questionnaire with thirty three questions which covered questions on parents' level of literacy, home background, how learners interacted with their academic work and how confident were adolescents regarding their academic performance. A five point Likert-type scale was used in the development of a questionnaire. The scale lays out five points separated by intervals assumed to be of equal distances. It is formally termed an equal appearing interval scale (Tuckman 1999: 216). According to Mitchell and Jolley (1996: 44), participants typically respond to a statement by checking the following 'strongly disagree' (scored 1) 'disagree' (scored 2) 'uncertain' (scored 3) 'agree' (scored 4) and 'strongly agree' (scored 5). The Likert-type scale gives the respondents the freedom to choose according to their feelings. To ensure validity of the instrument content and face validity were used whereby the instrument was given to experts in the field of Educational Psychology to ensure that the instrument measures the academic self-concept (De Vos et al. 1988: 84).

For qualitative data collection semi-structured individual interviews were based on getting an in-depth description of participant's feelings regarding their academic self-concept. The aim was to get individual perceptions of adolescent learners separately not influenced by their peers. The questions were based on (for example, *I always get support at home with my homework, my home has many books that I can read, my family tells me I am stupid, I am clever, I learn easily, I often fail tests, I am good at Mathematics*). In using the mixed methods (concurrent embedded strategy) the researchers were able to address different questions on disadvantaged home environment and academic self-concept which became a better approach (Creswell 2009).

Ethics were observed by researchers, whereby permission was obtained from the district office and principals in both schools were also consulted and permission was granted to researchers. Learners were also consulted and assent letters were signed. Human rights were observed and participants were allowed to participate voluntarily. Each interview lasted for fifteen to twenty minutes with each participant and all were conducted during breaks. The researchers asked permission to look at the mark schedules for learners progressively from grade 7 to grade 9 for early adolescents at a middle school, and for middle adolescents the grade 10 mark schedule was consulted. They also took consent from learners and indicated to them that we were also interested in looking at their academic performance from previous grades and the current year.

Analysis for Quantitative Data

All questionnaires were returned to researchers and were 461. In other questions, blank spaces were left by learners, hence the totals differ per questions. For quantitative data statistical techniques, ANOVA and Tukey's t-tests were used to test the hypotheses (Tuckman 1999).

RESULTS

A number of hypotheses were derived from the literature study, which guided the research

prior to being tested by means of the questionnaire.

Results of Hypotheses Testing

Problem 1

H_{01} : There is no statistically significant relationship between a disadvantaged home environment and the academic self-concept.

To test the aforementioned hypothesis, Pearson's correlation test was used. The correlation was determined as follows:

- (i) Home environment and academic self-concept

The result appears in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation between home environment and academic self-concept

Variables	Correlation	Significance
Home environment and academic self-concept	0.480	$p < 0.01$

The null-hypotheses may be rejected on the 1% level since the significance is smaller than 0,01. There is a significant relationship between home environment and the academic self-concept. The self-concept is moderate and positive, which means that the more positive the home environment, the more positive the academic self-concept.

Problem 2

H_{02} : There is no statistically significant difference in the academic self-concept of adolescents who stay under different kinds of supervision at home.

The results of testing this hypothesis appear in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean academic self-concept of adolescents who stay under different supervisions

Type of supervision	N	Mean
Both parents	208	3.6342
One parent	161	3.5604
Grandparents	37	3.5154
Guardians	20	3.3110
Other	24	3.4968
Total	450	3.5764

There is no statistically significant difference in the academic self-concept of learners who stay under different kinds of supervision. The null hypothesis may not be rejected since the significance is ($p > 0.05$)

Problem 3

H_{03} : There is no statistically significant difference in the academic self-concepts of learners with a different number of children at home.

ANOVA, followed by Tukey's t-test revealed that the academic self-concept of adolescents who are two in number in a family is not different ($p > 0.05$) from those of children who are five or more in the family (see Table 3).

Table 3: Mean academic self-concept of adolescents who stay with a different number of siblings

No. of siblings	N	Mean
One	43	3.5110
Two	82	3.6644
Three	135	3.6020
Four	87	3.5573
Five or more	104	3.5172
Total	451	3.5765

There is no significance difference between the academic self-concepts of adolescents who stay with a different number of siblings, thus the null hypothesis may not be rejected and the significance is ($p > 0.05$).

Problem 4

H_{04} : There is no statistically significant difference in the academic self-concepts of boys and girls.

Table 4 illustrates the results when this hypothesis was tested.

Table 4: Academic self-concepts of boys and girls

Self-concept	N	Mean	t-value	Df	Significance
Social:	252	3.5834	0.308	447	$p > 0.05$
Girls	197	3.5670			
Boys					

Table 4 indicates that the null-hypothesis may not be rejected. The academic self-concept

of girls and boys in a disadvantaged home environment do not differ.

Problem 5

H_{05} : There is no statistically significant difference in the academic self-concepts of learners in grades 9 and 11.

Table 5 illustrates the results when this hypothesis was tested.

Table 5: Academic self-concepts of grade 9 and grade 11 learners

Self-concept	N	Mean	t-value	Df	Significance
Academic:					
Grade 9	244	3.5990	1.035	445	$p > 0.05$
Grade 11	203	3.5444			

Table 5 indicates that the null-hypothesis may not be rejected (on the 5% level). The academic self-concepts of grades 9 and 11 learners do not differ.

Findings of Qualitative Data

All interviews were transcribed by researchers and experiences of participants living in disadvantaged home environments and how their academic self-concepts were influenced. The researchers followed Moustakas (1994: 15-16) guidelines. **Step 1:** It was important for the researchers to gain a sense of all the collected data within its context and we read through the data several times. In **Step 2:** they identified the meaning of units. After additional reading, the transcripts were broken down into units that expressed self-contained meaning in a psychological sense. The steps made it possible for us to identify parts that informed the understanding of the phenomenon under study. **Step 3:** They defined every meaning of each unit; we then eliminated redundancies and elaborated on the meaning of each unit by relating them to each other and to the sense of the whole. **Step 4:** They integrated the given units expressed in the participants' language. **Step 5:** The researchers articulated the meaning of units. During this step the derived meanings were in essence tested against the raw data to determine whether they were supported by data.'

From the significant statements we developed clusters of meaning into the following themes:

Home Background and Academic Achievement: Findings indicated that a home environment which was characterized by lack of resources such as books or reading material hindered cognitive development in adolescents. These findings are in agreement with previous research by Moletsane and Bouwer (2000). Learners indicated that for homework they often lacked materials to do a complete work due to lack of resources such as newspaper articles or magazines. The findings of the current study are similar to what Weiss and Kropmann (1993) found that the home is the backbone for children's development. In disadvantaged home environments newspapers are seldom bought. Simple things like pens, pencils and coloured pens may not be available at times due to lack of money. As a result learners find it difficult to write homework or they even go to school without writing utensils. Failure to complete homework or not doing class activities may cause learners to fail or to get lower marks for continuous assessment. From interviews, findings indicated that due to lack of electricity they often use candles or paraffin lamps, which at times may not be available and this is a hindrance for learners to study.

Parent/Guardian Level of Literacy: From interviews of adolescents findings revealed that most parents in villages and informal settlements had only primary school education or never went to school at all. Some adolescents were staying with grandparents since parents were working at mines or as domestic workers in cities. Some of the statements from adolescents were as follows:

'My dad and mom never went to school; I don't have anyone to help me with my homework'

'My grandma has only grade 4 education and I am in grade 9 therefore she can't help me'

From the above statements we noticed a hopeless situation for the adolescents since these learners' homes were unable to provide any form of assistance academically. The micro system failed to provide support and the low performance results in a low academic self-concept. Some of the factors like parents level of literacy educators at school cannot change as Singh and Granville (2002) indicated in their study. The findings of the study agree with find-

ings from previous research on parental involvement as Gibson and Jefferson (2006) highlighted that the child's self-concept is influenced by parental involvement in one's school work. Furthermore, Flouri and Buchanan (2003) point out that monitoring children's daily activities and keeping close track of their performance enhances their academic self-concept.

Availability of Parents/Guardian: Parents availability for their children's learning was found to be minimal in disadvantaged home environments. Parents, who were employed, arrived home late and very tired, hence they could not give their children attention for their school work. This is in agreement with previous research by Menaghan and Parcel (1995: 73) who pointed out that parents who were available for their children, their academic performance was positive and high. The interviewed adolescents showed low level of academic self-concept. Their utterances were as follows:

'I normally shy away to give answers in class since I do homeworks alone, and I have never been convinced that my answers were correct.'

'My mom arrives home late and is not in a position to help me either, for me I consider her unavailable for my studies.'

In child-headed homes it was tough for adolescents to study since the eldest child had to cook and wash shirts for younger siblings. By the time the adolescents finished with their household chores they were fatigued and failed to do their own school work. One adolescent said:

'I never failed a test but ever since my mom died I have never passed the way I used to, my grades have deteriorated'

The orphans' position reveals desperation due to lack of parents or guardians who can be of assistance to their academic work. The results of the study indicate that parental availability in the life of a child play a significant role in the academic self-concept of the child.

Support from Family Members: Findings revealed that disadvantaged home environments lacked support as far as the academic work of adolescents is concerned. Due to illiteracy, unemployment and stress emanating from factors such as divorce, lack of finances and death of a spouse, adolescents were not receiving adequate support from the family members. The micro system was also affected by factors outside the

home environment such as retrenchment of parents from work, and that affected also support towards school work. Some statements were as follows:

'I don't receive any support from anyone at home, they are always drunk, they don't even know the grade that I am currently in, so how can they help or support me.'

'My family criticises me always they say I am dull and that really make me to lose hope and I just don't put more effort in my studies.'

'None in my family passed grade 12 and they discourage me they say I will also follow suite I wont make it.'

'The minimum support that I had was taken by death. My parents' deaths robbed me my childhood, my joy of attending school... and I feel hopeless.'

It was clear from the above statements that these adolescents were discouraged about their academic work since there was no support. The criticisms destroy one's self-concept. Lack of role models in disadvantaged home environments also contributes towards low academic self-concept.

Family Size: Findings revealed that adolescents who come from disadvantaged home environments never had a problem with family size and how it influenced their academic self-concept. They never perceived bigger families in a negative way; this contradicts research findings of Menaghan and Parcel (1995) who pointed out that large family affected the academic self-concept negatively. In black families the number of children is not a problem, because many black families originally were in extended families with many children in one yard and a number of adults. Currently the Black families have shifted to nuclear families, and the study still reveals that the adolescents were not affected academically by large families.

Confidence and How Adolescents Perceive Themselves: It was interesting to note that the level of confidence between boys and girls who were interviewed was the same. All adolescents indicated that they do trust that they can pass if they studied hard and got more support at school since their homes had one or more problems. What was interesting is that they were all ambitious that they wanted to achieve certain goals in life though their average pass percentages were somewhere between 50-65% and they were failing one or two subjects in particular Mathe-

matics. Most felt inadequate and there was more of self-humiliation amongst the adolescents. Though they were having confidence that they can make it academically for those who came from child-headed household the future was somehow bleak and one said:

'even if I can pass matric who will take me to varsity, will I ever get a bursary?'

Such utterances indicated doubt and uncertainty about the future and goal formulation is minimum, therefore support from school that is the meso system is needed since the micro system lacked support.

Findings from Document Analysis

From the mark schedules only marks of twenty learners who were interviewed were analyzed from grade 7-grade 9, and for middle adolescents only grade 10 and grade 11 mid year results were analyzed. From these marks of 20 learners it was evident that those who lost both parents were struggling in other subjects and they were failing or got low marks. Adolescents who had at least both parents, single parent or guardian managed to pass all the subjects. Their performance differed a lot and hence we cannot make a generalization regarding their performance. None obtained a distinction in all subjects, which is a suggestion that adolescents who live in disadvantaged home environments do need support to boost their academic self-concept. Kaur et al. (2009) concur with the findings of this study by pointing out that in education a student needs a positive academic self-concept in order to be successful academically.

DISCUSSION

The academic self-concept in the life of an adolescent depends on the conditions that prevail in a home environment. The results in this research indicate a positive correlation between the home environment and the academic self-concept. From qualitative and quantitative findings it is clear as Creswell (2009) suggests, the following were evident; the atmosphere prevailing at home, parental support and care throughout the life of an adolescent build one's academic self-concept. From the literature study Burns (1982:210) and Chia (2000) indicate that what the child received from home and elementary school forms the basis of his/her academic self-con-

cept. The success achieved during earlier years in one's life forms the foundation for academic success even during adolescence and later. The role of the parent and significant others is crucial in creating an atmosphere in which the adolescent's academic self-concept can develop in a positive way. Clemons (2005), Johari (2009) and Morrison (2009) indicated that parental involvement plays a significant role in learner academic performance which in turn enhances the academic self-concept.

The current study revealed that the size of the family does not affect the academic self-concept in a negative way. In other words according to the findings of this study, the size of the family does not hinder the development of a positive academic self-concept. These findings differ with what Menaghan and Parcel (1995) found that an increase in family size may have a negative impact on the academic self-concept. In many black families, in the past, large families were a common phenomenon and that did deprive children of love, care and support. In black communities there are people who achieved academically even though they came from large families where children were nine or ten. As long as there is provision of material, emotional needs and parental support children are able to develop positive academic self-concept even in large families. From the findings of this study both quantitative and qualitative, it is clear that adolescents from disadvantaged home environments needed support in order that their academic self-concept could improve and be more positive.

CONCLUSION

The academic self-concept of children plays a significant role in their lives, though the home environment is a backbone thereof. Life Orientation teachers at a meso level are able to intervene in the lives of adolescents who come from disadvantaged home environments. The National Curriculum Statement from the Department of Education (2002) has a subject Life Orientation which has an outcome on personal development which addresses issues of self-concept of children. The study revealed that adolescents from disadvantaged home backgrounds have many challenges, that is from the micro system and some of these challenges have an impact on their academic self-concept. Lack of resources and

support from the home environment is crucial and may affect the learner to develop low academic self-concept. The school at a meso level has a challenge in supporting these adolescents and also to understand the context or the background of the home so that results can be achieved when academic content is presented in classes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers proposed a model in their earlier study Magano and Gouws (2009). The model may also be used by teachers in trying to address learners with low academic self-concept. The Life Orientation teachers have an opportunity of assisting learners with low academic self-concepts by identifying them in classes and initially they may provide group counseling. If the problem is not addressed by group counseling further intervention may be by individual counseling then later on parental involvement and other educators who teach the child. Other educators who may be of assistance may be teachers who are in the School Based Support Teams. The school governing body members may be involved especially those who may be willing to intervene in the homes of children who lack parental support for an example the orphans who don't have guardians. Furthermore social workers and psychologists may also intervene in assisting learners with low academic self-concept. Without the teachers' intervention in the lives of these learners adolescents may end up being drop outs at school level.

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