

Self-Esteem and Religiosity: Comparison of 13- to 15-Year-Old Students in Catholic and Public Junior High Schools

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An important goal of schooling is to support students' personal well-being, including to enhance their self-esteem (Bagley, 1989b; Bagley, Verma, Mallick, & Young, 1979). Self-esteem and self-concept (used as interchangeable constructs) are linked to scholastic achievement (Byrne, 1990), and, according to Kaplan (1980), inversely to school drop-out, delinquency, premature sexual activity, unwanted pregnancy, and substance abuse. In theory at least, the ethos of Catholic schools (which in many parts of Canada take more than a quarter of all students) should lead to greater integration with supportive social systems (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Lesko, 1988). Some North and South American and European studies (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Smith, Weigert, & Thomas, 1979) have shown that students in Catholic schools (or at least those accepting Catholic values, and attending church regularly) have somewhat higher levels of self-esteem than students in public schools; however, factors such as social class, age, and sex have not been entirely controlled for in these studies. In a Belgian study, Brutsaert (1995) points to the interesting finding that girls in Catholic schools, but not boys, have enhanced self-esteem levels. He speculates that the rather structured environment of the Catholic school enhances the self-esteem of girls, but not of boys. Finally, in a national U.S. study of some 30,000 adolescents, Donahue and Benson (1995) found that religiosity had no significant links with self-esteem, despite having significant negative correlations with suicidality, substance abuse, delinquency, and premature sexual involvement; thus Kaplan's earlier finding was not confirmed, although this may be due to the kind of measurements of self-appraisal used.

A CANADIAN STUDY

The findings we report here are part of a cross-cultural programme comparing adolescent stress and various indicators of adjustment (including self-esteem) in junior high school students in Canada, Britain, Hong Kong, and the Philippines

(Bagley & Mallick, 1995). In this note we draw on statistical analysis of three short self-esteem scales (Coopersmith, in Bagley, 1989a; Piers-Harris, in Bagley & Mallick, 1978; and Semantic Differential Self-Appraisal, in Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1955) completed by 410 public school (PS) students, and 494 Catholic (RC) school students, aged 13 to 15. The samples were obtained by asking each respective school board to nominate two schools, one in a typical middle-class area, and one in a typical working-class area. Across different types of school the three self-esteem or self-appraisal measures had correlations of between 0.54 and 0.71 ($ps < .001$).

Besides completing the self-esteem measures, students completed a measure of religious participation: 0 = no religion; 1 = nominal attachment to denomination, not practising; 2 = attends place of worship about monthly or at major festivals; 3 = attends place of worship at least weekly. Means (1.83 for RC males, 1.73 for PS males; 2.07 for RC females, 1.91 for PS females) were significantly different ($t = 2.93$, $.01 < p < .03$) only for the comparison across types of school for females. These means indicate too that many students in RC schools were not practising Catholics (and some had other religions, since RC schools did not require being Catholic as a strict admission criterion). In public schools a substantial minority of students were, with their parents, active participants in religion (Christianity, Sikhism, Hinduism, and Islam).

Regardless of the actual religion students were affiliated with, the religious participation index had moderate but statistically significant correlations (ranging from .15 to .20, $.001 < ps < .05$) with the measures of self-esteem, indicating somewhat higher levels of self-esteem in students in both Catholic and public schools who participated actively in religion. These significant correlations remained when years of parental education (as indicated by their child), and student sex and age were controlled for.

Comparison of mean levels of aggregated scale items (i.e., scale totals) for the three self-esteem measures, and of years of parental education (mean of father's and mother's education) between the two types of school indicated *no* significant differences. Although religiosity was significantly associated with enhanced self-esteem levels, the differences in the religiosity index between the two types of school were not large enough to be reflected in overall differences on the self-esteem measures.

We analyzed further the item means in the 39-item Piers-Harris Scale, and the unrotated factor structure of this scale. Compared to PS females, RC females had significantly ($p < .05$) better self-esteem on only three Piers-Harris items: "I am rarely afraid," "I have good ideas," and "I am often nice to other people". They had significantly poorer self-esteem on one item: "I think bad thoughts." RC males differed significantly ($p < .05$) from PS males on only two items: "I am rarely afraid" (RC males showed better self-esteem), and "I think bad thoughts" (RC males showed poorer self-esteem). Presumably self-criticism at thinking

“bad thoughts” is a result of Catholic religious education about the nature of guilt.

The factor structure of the 39 Piers-Harris items was identical across sex and school-type samples, a finding similar to that for Canadian students’ responses to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Bagley, Bolitho, & Bertrand, 1997).

CONCLUSION

We conclude that self-esteem levels across two types of schooling, Catholic and public, are largely similar; findings of North and South American and European studies have not been confirmed with this Canadian sample. Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore’s (1982) finding of significantly higher levels of self-esteem in students in Catholic schools was not confirmed. However, level of self-esteem was associated with degree of religious participation, regardless of the actual denomination with which the student was affiliated; this contradicts Donahue and Benson’s (1995) finding of no significant association. Few differences between sexes were found, disconfirming Brutsaert’s finding (1995) with Belgian elementary school students.

Only Smith et al.’s study, showing links between religiosity and self-esteem in high school students in four of the five cultures studied, was confirmed by our data. But it is religiosity per se, rather than being Catholic in particular, that is associated with higher self-esteem. Exactly why religious participation is associated with somewhat higher levels of self-esteem remains a subject for further study.

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