

Academic Failure at Grade Four: A Quantitative Approach to the Self-Concept of Students.

Abstract

This study examines the impact of academic failure on the self-concept of the students. The students studying at grade four in public primary schools of the urban areas of Rawalpindi were taken as study sample. A two-phase panel study was designed to collect quantitative data, i.e. at the start of the last term of preceding academic session and in the first month of successive academic year. The self-concept of the students (N=305) was measured through Urdu translation of Beck Youth Inventory for Self-Concept of Children (BSCI-Y). In phase two, the study sample was divided into two main groups on the basis of annual school results, i.e. failed and promoted students. A series of analysis were performed with the quantitative data to analyze the variations in the self-concept of the two groups. The findings of the study revealed highly significant and negative impact of academic failure on the self-concept of the students.

Key words: *Self-concept, Success, Failure, Public Schools*

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is an essential component of the instructional process. Assessment process helps the teachers and educationists to make judgments about students' academic performance. The success of any education system directly depends on the efficient practice of its assessment process. For effective functioning of the instructional process, the teachers require certain information regarding the levels of students' achievement. Through this process, the teacher can locate the under achievers and also the students who are capable and ready for the next class.

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The formal process of learning has evolved from thousand years' of experience. Historical evidence has revealed that the earliest classrooms were those of the Sumerian civilization, from which the clay tablets on which students practiced their writing have been recovered.

--- The long history of educational assessment can be dated from at least 2200 BC when the Mandarins set up a civil-service testing program. ---For the most part, oral examinations (*viva voce*) were used, until the late 1800s, to evaluate the achievements (Athanasius & Lamprianou, 2005, p. 5).

The basic aim of these assessments was to determine the academic achievements of the pupils. As a consequence of these assessments, the students were placed in a "pass" and "fail" category. Those who had passed move on to the next level, while those who failed were compelled to repeat the same grade or leave the system. In this way, the students have been retained since the days of the earlier formal schooling. More or less the same practice is seen in the modern schooling. "The debate over the effectiveness of grade retention continues since those days" (Tomchin & Impara, 1992, p.200).

A fundamental characteristic of modern schooling is the homogeneity of children in a class in respect of mental capability and age. Transitions through the grades are primarily based on mental capability of the child, but, due to individual differences, all children do not progress at the same rate. This fact forces the educationists to think about how to manage the growing inequality of academic status among the students. One option is to continue the traditional policy of grade retention. Under this policy, students showing poor academic performance are retained in their existing grade rather than being promoted to the next grade. The major aim of retention is considered to improve academic performance by giving children, who are not ready for promotion, an extra year to develop adequate academic skills. Such a policy is often justified as an essential practice for maintaining grade level standards and accountability of students. Due to this policy, the heterogeneity of age within one grade is increased, but a homogenous environment in respect of academic achievement is created within classroom, thus making the instruction practices more efficient.

Quite a large number of research studies indicated that school failure is a major cause of low self-concept⁷⁰ in students. School failure damages their self-image and they

⁷⁰The self-concept is said to be a set of planned self-attitudes that are relatively established and "characteristic" of an individual (Demo, 1992, p.303).

often start disliking themselves. Trethewey (1999) affirmed that “being rated as “unfit for promotion” at the end of a year frequently undermined a child's self-respect and confidence” (p.280). Likewise, M.C. Martin (1995) endorsed that “failure in school plays a significant role in forming a negative self-image, especially when the child’s self-concept is negative to begin with” (p.68). Similarly, Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, and Rosenberg (1995) stated in their study that “children with poor academic self-concepts are often described as having low self-esteem⁷¹” (p.143). Consistent with this view, Westbury (1994) was of the opinion that, “the emotional strain attached to repeating a grade would lower self-esteem among repeaters” (p.248).

Chetcuti & Griffiths (2002) revealed in their study of the “implications for student self-concept of ordinary differences in schools of Malta and England that the self-concept of students is affected by their perceived ability, especially as formalized from test results or other assessments” (p.544). Similarly, Psacharopoulos, Rojas, and Velez (1993) also found in their study of cognitive achievement of third and fifth graders that “repeaters had a negative self-esteem” (p.272).

Rodney, Crafter, Rodney and Mupier, (1999) found that “retained students displayed exacerbated behavior problems” (p.185). Consistent with this view, Westbury (1994) explored in her study that “the emotional strain attached to repeating a grade would lower self-esteem in repeaters” (p.248). Furthermore, Anderson (2000) also endorsed in his study that “repetition has an effect on dropout statistics: it lowers self-esteem and isolates the student from his/her friends and peers” (p.121). In the same way, Stearns, Moller, Blau, and Potochnick (2007) demonstrated in their study that “retained students have lower self-esteem than continuously promoted students” (p.231).

Rosenberg, Schooler and Schoenbach (1989) indicated that “the well-established relationship between self-esteem and academic performance is primarily attributable to the effects of school marks on self-esteem” (p.1014). The authors used “a panel of 1886 adolescent boys to explore the reciprocal relationships between self-esteem and poor school performance” (p.1004). The findings showed that “school marks have a significant effect on self-esteem” (p.1015). Moreover, this study also revealed that “the relationship between self-esteem and school performance is primarily attributable to the effect of school performance on self-esteem” (p.1004). Similarly, the findings of another study by Rosenberg, et al (1995) indicated that the “degree to which specific academic self-esteem affects global self-esteem, particularly the positive component of global self-esteem, is a function of how highly academic

⁷¹ Self-concept and self-esteem are often used as synonyms in research literature.

performance is personally valued” (p.141). Owens (1994) used non-recursive linear structural equation models and collected data from the “Youth in Transition” study, to compare the reciprocal interrelations of self-deprecation (negative self-evaluations), positive self-worth (positive self- evaluations), and global self-esteem (which includes both positive and negative evaluations) on high school grades” (p.391). The data indicated that “school achievement is important to adolescent self-worth, as theory suggests, and that it may foster positive feelings when grades are high, and stimulate self- reproach when grades are low” (p.405). Consistent with this view, Burfeind and Bartusch (2006) stated that “poor school performance leads to frustration and anger and subsequently to delinquent behavior” (p.320). Gipps and Tunstall (1998) endorsed in their study that “the development of a favorable self-concept in children is dependent upon perceiving themselves as successful, this in turn may depend on the way the child interprets the teachers' reaction to his/her performances” (p.151). Similarly, Chetcuti and Griffiths (2002) stated that “the self-esteem of students is affected by their perceived ability, especially as formalized from test results or other assessments” (p.544).

In line with the international commitment of Millennium Development Goals, Government of Pakistan has decided to implement the policy of automatic promotion in the first three grades of primary level (with some variations across the provinces) in all public schools of Pakistan in 2002. The basic aim of this policy was to increase the enrolment ratio by lowering the dropout rate at primary level, for achieving the target of universal primary education. Due to this policy, almost all students of first three grades in the public schools are automatically promoted ignoring the academic performance they have shown throughout the year. As a result, majority of poor performers reach grade four and then they are retained here as they are considered academically wanting to appear in the departmental examination. In this way, the first experience of grade retention affects them severely and they feel very disturbed and shocked. Most of these students leave school in order to avoid expected insult by peers and teachers. The latest official statistics have confirmed this fact also (Government of Pakistan, 2006; AEPAM, 2008, AEPAM, 2009).

Table 1

Dropout Rates by Grade and Gender at Elementary Level for Public Sector Institutions (2005)

<u>Grades</u>	<u>Dropout Rates</u>		
	Total	Male	Female
Between Grade I and II	14.1%	16.1%	11.2%
Between Grade II and III	3.7%	8.6%	-
Between Grade III and IV	5.0%	7.4%	1.5%
Between Grade IV and V	8.5%	9.9%	6.5%

Source: National Education Census, 2005, Government of Pakistan, 2006, p.32

As revealed by Table 1 that the dropout rate between grade four to five is 8.5 % , higher than the dropout rate between grade two to four, i.e. 3.7 % , 5.0 % respectively. The existing educational practice in primary education system is said to be one of the possible causes of this high dropout rate. This fact is also described by a high number of repeaters at primary level by the data taken from latest report of Pakistan Education Statistics as revealed in Table 2 respectively.

Table 2

Enrolment Statistics at elementary level in public schools of Pakistan

Grade	<u>% of Repeaters compared to Total Enrolment</u>	
	2006-2007	2007-2008
1	4.5%	3.5%
2	3.9%	2.8%
3	3.9%	2.6%
4	7.0%	4.5%
5	1.3%	0.6%

Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2006-07, 2007-08, (Government of Pakistan, 2008, Government of Pakistan, 2009)

Table 2 reveals that, greater numbers of students repeat grade four as compared to the other grades, except grade one of primary level in the public schools of Pakistan. This sad situation is perhaps due to the current policy of automatic promotion in the first three grades along with final departmental examinations at the end of 5th grade. The official statistics evident that the current governmental policy and attitude of the schools' authorities towards slow learners has severely affected the performance of 4th grade students. Poverty is a major social problem in Pakistan, and when a student fails in some grade having low socio-economic background, his/her parents do not

agree to spend money and time for an extra year. So, majority of the students leave the school for doing some work, thus increasing dropout rate. In addition to this, the students who repeat the same grade are subject to continuous criticism of class fellow even their teachers also criticize them, because primary school teachers are not very well-aware of the concepts like self-esteem and other personality development factors of the students.

On the basis of above discussion, it was needed to identify the impact of failure on the self-concept of fourth grade students, especially in the context of a developing country like Pakistan. Therefore, the present study is designed to investigate the possible effects of academic failure on the self-concept of students of grade four in public schools in the context of Pakistan. It is anticipated that, this study would be useful in identifying issues related to academic failure of primary grade students. The study is also useful in developing effective strategies in the primary education system of Pakistan, where the high dropout at primary level is considered a big hurdle in the way of achieving the target of universal primary education.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was descriptive in nature and quantitative techniques were applied to achieve the study objectives. As the automatic promotion policy is homogenously implemented at primary level in all public schools of Pakistan, so by employing convenience sampling technique, the 4th grade students (N =305) of the public schools (N=42) of Rawalpindi city were selected as the study sample. A two-phase panel study was designed to collect quantitative data.

For the study of self-concept of the students, “Beck Youth inventory⁷² for self-concept (BSCI-Y)” was adapted (Beck, Beck, Jolly and Steer, 2005) and translated in Urdu by the researcher for Pakistani students, and its validity was checked by two experts. The Cronbach’s Alfa reliability of the Urdu version, of this 20 item scale, was measured by using SPSS⁷³ 13.0. The data was measured by taking a sample of 48 students in pilot testing phase, ranging between the ages 11 to 14, studying in grade four of the public schools of Rawalpindi city. The reliability level of .88 was attained, that was quite near to the reliability (0.89 for girls and, 0.91 for boys) measured by the authors of the scale, with a sample of 400 children (girls= 201 and boys=199) of age 7 to 10 (Beck et al., 2005, p.39). The Urdu translation of the scale was administered to the sample students in the two phases. In the first phase, the self-concept scale was administered to the sample at the start of last term in January 2013.

⁷² The Beck Youth Inventory for self-concept (BSCI-Y) used to assess self-concepts in children between the ages of 7 and 10 years old.

⁷³ SPSS, Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

The report of the annual school examination served for the purpose of dividing the sample into two groups, i.e. failed and promoted students. The result record of annual examination held in March 2013 of the grade four in the sample schools was taken for this purpose. The sample students (both promoted and failed) were reassessed by the same scale in the first month of the successive academic year.

ANALYSIS

Following the collection of data and coding of completed self-concept scale, the statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 13.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). T-test sampling techniques were carried out to demonstrate how the performance in annual examination affects the self-concept of students. There were total 305 cases of grade four which were taken from forty two public primary schools of Rawalpindi city. The sample included both poor performers and the normal students. After announcement of annual school result, this sample was divided into failed and successful students. The failed students repeated grade four, whereas the successful students were promoted to grade five.

The situation analysis of the whole study sample in the next academic year is described as follows:

Table 3

Detailed Account of the Original Sample of the Study (N=346)

Successful	failed	Left ⁷⁴	Remaining Sample
199	147	41	305

Table 3 presents the detailed account of the original sample of the study. There were 199 promoted, 147 failed and 41 left cases. Due to left cases, the remaining sample of the study was reduced to 305.

⁷⁴ Here, left cases included both dropouts and left the sample school for carrying their studies in some other schools

Table 4

Gender Description of the whole Study Sample (N=346)

Category	Frequency	Left	Retained
Boys	148 (42.7%)	34 (22.9 %)	114 (77.1%)
Girls	198 (57.3%)	07 (3.6%)	191 (96.4%)

The Table 4 presents the situation analysis of study sample on the basis of gender. There were total 148 (42.7 %) boys' sample, among them 34 (22.9 %) left the school and 114 (77 %) retained in school and continued their studies in the same school. There were 198 (57.2 %) girls in the whole sample, 07 (3.5 %) left the school and 191 (96.4 %) remained in the same school and continued their studies

Table 5

Sample Division (pass/fail) of the sample on the basis of Annual School Result (N=346)

Category	Frequency	Dropout/left	Retained
Successful	199(57.51%)	11 (5.5%)	188 (94.6 %)
Failed	147(42.48%)	30 (20.4%)	117 (79.6 %)

The Table 5 presents the distribution of the whole study sample (N=346) on the basis of annual school results. Out of total 346 fourth grade students, 199 (57.51%) were declared successful in annual examination, among them 11(5.5%) left the school, whereas 188 (94.6%) remained in the same school and continued their education. There are 147 (42.48%) students who failed in annual examination, out of them, 30 (20.4%) were dropped out⁷⁵ from the school, whereas 117 (79.6%) continued their studies and repeated the same grade.

Table 6:

Gender wise Description of the study sample on the basis of Annual School Result (N=305)

Category	Frequency	Passed	Failed
Boys	114 (37.4%)	74 (64.9%)	40(35.1%)
Girls	191 (62.6%)	114(59.6%)	77(40.3%)

⁷⁵ As according the schools' report, these students left school without taking school leaving certificate, so they considered as dropout.

Table 6 presents the gender description of the study sample excluding drop out and left cases. There were 114 (37.4 %) boys and 191 (62.6 %) girls included in the sample i.e. total of 305 fourth grade students. Out of 114 boys, 74 (64.9%) were passed and 40 (35.1%) were declared fail in annual examination. In the girls' sample, 114 (59.6%) were passed and 77 (40.3%) failed in examination. The reason of greater percentage of female students was the greater number of girls' enrolment ratio in public primary schools, included in the study sample.

In order to see the impact of success and failure on the self-concept of the students, the self-concept scores of the failed and promoted group of sample students before annual examination (Phase 1) was compared with their self-concept scores after examination (phase 2).

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics regarding Self-Concept⁷⁶ (N=305)

Variables	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	Std. deviation
SC-1 ⁷⁷	30.00	65.00	47.69	7.84
SC-2 ⁷⁸	28.00	65.00	47.43	7.66

Table 7 presents the descriptive statistics regarding self-concept scores of the study sample in Phase 1 and Phase 2. The self-concept scores of the study sample in both phases also demonstrated some similarities. The minimum self-concept score in Phase 1 was 30.00 that declined to 28.00 in Phase 2. The maximum self-concept score of the study sample was same in both the phases. The mean score for self-concept of students in Phase 1 was 47.69 with a standard deviation of 7.84, whereas the mean score for self-concept of the students in Phase 2 was 47.36 with a standard deviation of 7.80.

As discussed earlier, the whole study sample was further divided into two sub categories i.e. failed sample and promoted sample, so their separate descriptive statistics were also calculated in order to get clearer picture of the whole sample.

⁷⁶ Total score for Self-Concept (SC) =65

⁷⁷ SC-1= Self- Concept score in phase 1(before annual school examination).

⁷⁸ SC-2= Self-Concept score in phase 2 (in the first month of successive year).

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics regarding Self-Concept of Failed Sample (n=117)

Variables	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	Std. deviation
SC-1	30.00	62.00	47.56	7.59
SC-2	28.00	60.00	44.64	7.29

With respect to failed sample, the Table 8 indicates that the minimum self-concept score in Phase 1 was 30.00 and maximum score was 62.00. The mean score in Phase 1 was 47.56 with a standard deviation of 7.59. In the Phase 2, the minimum self-concept score of failed students was 28.00 whereas, the maximum score was 56.00. The mean score of self-concept in phase 2 was 42.65 with a standard deviation of 6.48.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics regarding Self-concept of Promoted Sample (n=188)

Variables	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	Std. deviation
SC-1	30.00	65.00	47.77	8.01
SC-2	30.00	65.00	49.16	7.55

Table 9 presents the descriptive statistics of promoted sample regarding their self-concept scores in both the phases. In Phase 1, the minimum self-concept score of promoted sample was 30.00 and maximum score was 65.00. The mean score in Phase 1 was 47.77 with a standard deviation of 8.01. In the Phase 2, the minimum self-concept score of promoted students was 30.00, whereas the maximum score was 65.00. The mean score of self-concept in phase 2 was 49.16 with a standard deviation of 7.55.

Table 10

Comparison of Self-Concept (Phase 1 &Phase 2) of Failed sample (n=117) and Promoted sample (n=188)

Failure	Promoted			
	Mean	t-value	Mean	t-value
SC-2	44.64		49.16	
vs.		- 6.80***		5.51***
SC-1	47.56		47.77	

*** Significant at .000

Table 10 presents the comparison of self-concept of failed and promoted sample in two times, i.e. before annual examination and after examination. The mean of self-concept score of failed sample, after examination (phase 2), was 44.64 and before examination (Phase 1) was 47.56. The mean difference ($t = -6.80$) between the two set of scores was found highly significant at .000 alpha. The negative sign of t -value indicated a decrease in the self-concept of this sample after failure. The mean of self-concept, of promoted students, after examination was 49.16 and before examination (Phase 1) was 47.77. The findings of the t -test for self-concept scores ($t = 5.51$) of the before - annual examination and just after examination revealed significant results at .000 alpha. The analysis presented in the Table 10 depicted highly significant impact of academic failure on the self-concept of the students. The analysis demonstrated that the mean differences of self-concept scores of failed students revealed negative impact of academic failure, whereas, the mean differences of self-concept of promoted students showed positive significant results after success in annual examination.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to find out the impact of academic failure on the self-concept of the students. This objective was achieved by applying quantitative techniques on the self-concept scores of the failed and promoted students before annual examination (phase 1) with their self-concept scores after examination (phase 2). The statistical analysis demonstrated that mean differences of failed sample revealed negative impact of failure, whereas, the mean differences of self-concept score of promoted students showed positive and significant results of success in annual examination. This conclusion is also supported by a number of research studies, (Pomplun, 1988; Westbury, 1994; Gottfredson et al., 1994; Trethewey, 1999; Anderson, 2000; Stearns et al., 2007). The findings of this study reveal that, the first experience of academic failure affects them severely and they feel very disturbed and shocked. It was also found that 30 students left school after failure in annual examination without taking school leaving certificate⁷⁹. In this way, they dropped out from education system. Most of these students leave school in order to avoid expected insult by peers and teachers in the repeated year. It may be because of their limited financial resources as the entire sample schools located in the economically deprived areas of Rawalpindi city. The latest official statistics have confirmed this fact also (GoP, 2006; AEPAM, 2008). The statistics clearly reveal that the automatic promotion in first three grades and then high rate of retention at grade four has proved an unsuccessful practice.

⁷⁹ School leaving certificate is a necessary requirement for admission in other school.

Literature on grade retention and automatic promotion policy demonstrates that these policies would prove workable if accompanied by other helping measures, such as special coaching and summer classes etc, (Tomchin and Impara, 1992; Gomes-Neto and Hanushek, 1994). Moreover, the literature review clearly demonstrated that other factors such as socioeconomic status of the parents and parent-child affection are also main contributing factors in the development of self-concept of the students (Wiltfang & Scarbecz, 1990; Roberts & Bengtson, 1993). Further research in this area could explore the significant role of these factors.

Recommendations of the Study

The current study has uncovered an important issue related to primary education at grass root level. The researcher realized that some recommendations based on the conclusion of the study will also prove valuable in the promotion of Universal Primary Education in Pakistan. These recommendations are related to different categories and are given below.

Relating Alternatives to Grade Retention

The findings of the present study suggested that the current practice of automatic promotion policy in the first three grades and grade retention in the last two grades of primary level needs revision after careful analysis of grass root problems. These policies can be workable if they are accompanied by other reform measures. The literature has offered a number of alternatives to grade retention. Stone and Engel (2007) proposed that

--- as an alternative to (or, at least, in parallel to) “doing retention differently,” investment in other efforts at the levels of both scholarship and practice may yield more promising outcomes, systematic efforts to develop individualized, classroom, and school strategies to address differing learning needs within students, as well as differing densities of these students across classrooms and school (p.630).

Similarly, Stearns et al. (2007) had suggested the alternatives to grade retention, including “summer schools and academies that keep children with their same-age peers while ensuring that they gain mastery of the academic content and skills that had previously caused them difficulty, can be attractive” (p.231). In the same way, Meisels and Liaw (1993) proposed in the concluding remarks of their study of examining the phenomenon of retention in kindergarten through eighth grade that “retention should be used only in rare exceptions, and new approaches to curriculum development, school restructuring, and individualized student instruction should

become the focus of efforts to improve academic outcomes” (p.76). It is therefore strongly recommended that the policy of automatic promotion at the first three grades of primary level should be modified after careful survey of ground realities, and thus be implemented with other reform measures as discussed above. Moreover, the high ratio of grade retention at grade four should also be noticed, and must take effective steps to minimize the negative consequences of this phenomenon.

Relating Teacher Education and Training Programs

The major findings of the present study are related to the psychological aspect of the students’ personality that significantly affects their academic performance. Presently, the child psychology has a dominant place in the curriculum of teacher education. In practical situation, the teachers’ attitude especially at primary level does not present a learned behavior. It reveals that the teacher education and training programs are based on theoretical knowledge and not on practical know-how and are not as effective as they should be. The researcher recommends that while designing teacher training programs the practical aspects of child psychology alone with theoretical considerations ought to be build up, as depicted in the conclusion of the present study. If the practical aspects of child behavior are incorporated into the training programs, they may become more viable, relevant and acceptable for the teachers.

Relating Classroom Teachers

The findings of the present study revealed that the psychological aspect of self-concept is associated with the phenomenon of grade retention. The teacher should encourage students in a manner, that they perceive themselves as efficient individuals, through their own effort and responsibility during the learning process. In the light of study findings, the researcher recommends that primary teachers should realize the significance of psychological aspect of the child development in teaching practice. They should be more caring and considerate about their students' needs and interests and should help them define their personal goals.

Suggestions for Future Research

The present study is said to be a base-line study on the topic of grade retention in the field of primary education in Pakistan. During the whole study process, a number of issues arose that need further exploration. During this research, the phenomenon of grade retention of the fourth grade students was studied in relation to their self-concept. The failed students were compared with promoted students. The findings of this study also highlighted many interesting possibilities for future research in Pakistan, such as gender differences among repeaters and the link between grade retention and drop out of students from education system etc. There are a number of

individual level differences, between repeaters and promoted students, which were not included in the study such as relationship of repeaters with successful peers, the contribution of family support factors in success or failure etc. The impact of grade retention needs further exploration. Moreover, the aspect of engagement with schooling was also beyond the scope of this study and thus needs to be investigated. In addition to this, further research on the topic of grade retention could involve parents and school administration, for looking at the relationship between grade retention and the factors related to the personality development of student.

Finally, the researcher realized during data collection process, that there is need of some kind of comprehensive investigation about the dropout cases. The students, who left school after passing the annual examination, took school leaving certificates for getting admissions in some other school. On the other hand, those who left after failure in examination and without taking school leaving certificate emerged as drop out cases. Nobody knew about the status of those drops out cases, whether they started their studies in some other private schools or left the education system. There should be a comprehensive study on such cases as they appear as wastage in education system.

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