

Full Length Research paper

An exploratory study of social adjustment among Youth in residential homes

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The purpose of this study was to examine differences of social adjustment factors between youths living in residential care setting and the non residential care youths. Out of 468 youths who participated in this study, 127 were living in residential homes (Mean age = 15.46 years, SD= 1.54) and 341 youths were not (Mean age= 13.76, SD=0.63). They were surveyed on social adjustment factors of family support, peer support, teacher support sense of belonging and student's motivation to learn. Focus group discussions were also held. A two way between multivariate analysis of variance was performed to investigate age and group differences in social adjustment factors. Results showed that residential care youths had a more negative perception of teachers compared to non residential care youths; residential care youths had a more positive perception of family bonding compared to non residential care youths. For residential care youths, there was also an increase in self-initiated learning behaviors as age increased. Results indicated that residential care youths were not as maladjusted as initially thought and lent support to the strengths based approach to working with youths.

Keywords: Social adjustment, youth at risks, residential care, Singaporean.

INTRODUCTION

Adjustment is a term used in everyday life and is important in maintaining social peace and harmony in society. Adjustment happens when a member of society "fits" into society according to societal norms and standards. To measure social adjustment, researchers have used indicators such as physical health, psychological well-being, behavioral problems, and academic performance. (Susabbe et al., 1987; Chen et al., 2000; Larzler et al., 2001) A socially adjusted person will try to behave according to societal norms so that he/she can adjust with others. On the other hand, a socially maladjusted person will not behave according to societal norms, which can give rise to problems.

In the children and youth sector, adolescents who do not behave according to societal norms are commonly known as "at risk youths". The profile of these youths may include coming from dysfunctional families, experienced abuse and neglect, are beyond parental control and/or are in conflict with the law. At risk youths

generally have poorer outcomes compared to the general population. They are usually low achieving and do not have the ability or resources to cope with academic demands (Chen et al., 2009) and are associated with increased risks of later adjustment difficulties (Fergusson and Lynskey, 1997). These youths are generally sent to institutions providing residential care programmes for care, protection and rehabilitation so that they can successfully reintegrate into society.

Unfortunately there is a dearth of social adjustment research done with this population. It is thus of interest that we investigate the different factors that predict social adjustment outcomes focusing on the 3 major social environments of an adolescent's life: Family, school and peers. Contributing factors of social adjustment that have been studied include family support, peer support, teacher support, sense of belonging to school and motivation to learn.

Social adjustment in the context of the family

Parental and family support has been highlighted as significant and crucial in adolescent adjustment. The vast

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amount of research studies in the area point to the various aspects of the parent-child relationship as impacting several areas of adolescent growth and development related to his social adjustment. For example, research in this area suggests that the presence of parental care and warmth predict cooperative and affiliative behavior and social competence in children (Hart, Dewolf, Wozniak, and Burts, 1992). Conversely, parental neglect has been found to predict maladaptive and incompetent behavior (Dishion, 1990). Furthermore, close and caring relationships with parents who are nurturing and supportive help the adolescent to overcome life adversities (Barnes and Farrell, 1992; Gecas and Seff, 1990).

Social adjustment in the context of their peer relationships

Peer influences play an important role in adolescent's life, since they spend more time with their peers in daily life. Understanding peer support could tell us if adolescents are doing well in their social life in terms of emotional or practical helps provided to each other. Several studies have also reported that youth who are sociable and are accepted by their peers are usually emotionally stable, academically competent, and socially well adjusted (Coie et al., 1990; Chen et al., 1992; Vandell and Hembree, 1994). On the other hand, youths who are not accepted by their peers and display hostile behaviors tend to be socially maladjusted and are at risk for school dropout, delinquency, and psychopathology (Chen et al., 1995; Coie et al., 1990).

Social adjustment in the context of the school

Research has examined several factors in the school setting that may affect social adjustment. Among the many factors, this present study will be focusing on teacher support, sense of belonging and student's motivation to learn.

Teacher Support

A study by Klem and Connell (2004) indicated that teacher support is vitally important to student's engagement in school. Adolescents need to feel that teachers in school are involved in with them and care about their performance. Reddy et al. (2003) found that teacher support significantly raised students' self esteem and reduced depression levels.

Sense of belonging to school

Students develop a sense of belonging to the school through participation in academic and non-academic activities. Researchers used the term "sense of belonging" to refer to extent to which the student participates in school activities and identifies with and values schooling outcomes (Finn, 1989). The psychological component emphasizes students' sense of belonging to school, which has to do with adolescent's feeling of being accepted and valued by their peers and others in their school (Willms, 2000). Feelings of academic efficacy and school belonging were found to be positively related to final semester academic grades (Robert et al., 1996).

Student's motivation to learn

Motivation is necessary for learning to take place (Biehler and Snowman 1986). Students will only be able to achieve good grades when effective learning takes place. Several studies have found a positive correlation between motivation and academic achievement. Tella (2007) investigated the impact of motivation on Mathematics school grades and found that there was a significant difference in Math grades when comparing students with high motivation and students with low motivation. Highly motivated students scored better compared to lowly motivated students. In another study, Lepper et al (2005) found that intrinsic motivation was positively correlated with achievement scores but extrinsic motivation was found to be negatively correlated with academic outcomes. The study also examined age differences in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It was found that as age increased, intrinsic motivation decreased.

Aim of the current study

Based on previous research (Chen et al., 2009; Fergusson and Lynskey, 1997), youth at risks tend to be less socially adjusted. In this study, we are assuming that youths residing in residential homes are socially maladjusted and that the youths not in residential services will be better adjusted. Thus, it is of our interest to examine differences of social adjustment factors between youth at risks (youths staying in residential settings) and the mainstream youths (youths not living in residential settings). In addition, we will be examining age differences in social adjustment factors as previous research have found age to be a factor influencing social adjustment factors (Lepper et al., 2005).

METHOD

Participants

A total of 468 youths participated in this study. The sample consisted of 127 residential youths from 4 residential homes and 341 non residential youths from 3 secondary schools. Specifically, non-residential youths are students in secondary schools who are not in living in residential settings (definition of non-residential youth as according to MCYS). Majority of agencies who did not participate in the study cited confidentiality issues as reasons for not participating in the study. Other agencies failed to get back to us without giving us any reason. To eliminate the problem of confounding due to unequal sample sizes, weighted means were used in the factorial analysis of the data.

The mean age of non-residential youth was 13.76 years old ($SD = 0.634$) and the mean age for residential youth was 15.46 years old ($SD = 1.54$). While there was a significant difference in age between residential and non-residential youths (Mann Whitney U Test; $Z = -12.45$, $p < .01$), the problem of confounding is eliminated through the use of weighted means in the factorial analysis of the data. In term of races, the sample was mainly Chinese (63%). Other races included Malays (19%) Indian (11%), Eurasian (6%) and other minority groups (1%). Males were overrepresented in this sample with a constitution of 79% and females constituted 21%. The sample was made up of mainly lower secondary students: Sec 1 (40%); Sec 2 (41%); Sec 3 (6.6%); Sec 4 (6.4%); Others (6%). About half of the sample (50%) came from English speaking homes, 17% came from Malay speaking homes and 30% came from Mandarin speaking homes while 3% of the sample spoke other languages in their home.

MATERIALS

The survey questionnaire was chosen as the instrument for data collection since Singaporean youths are generally familiar with doing surveys. The questionnaire was self-constructed and sought to assess the student's motivation to learn, sense of belonging to school, perception of teacher support, perception of peer support and perception of family bonding using the 5 point Likert scale. For the full set of questions please refer to Appendix A. The survey was self-constructed as we were not able to obtain permission to use the existing instruments. Factor analysis was done to establish the validity of the instrument. Factor analysis results showed that for all five factor solutions most statements had communalities of at least 0.4. It is common in the social sciences to observe low to moderate communalities of 0.40 to 0.70 (Costello and Osborne, 2005) thus validity of the instrument was considered satisfactory. Reliability

tests were also conducted to ascertain internal consistency of the scales. Teacher support scale and family support scale showed good internal consistency with cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.90 and 0.94 respectively. The attitudes to education ($\alpha = 0.77$), belonging to school ($\alpha = 0.74$) and peer support scale ($\alpha = 0.61$) exhibited acceptable reliability.

Procedure

The self-constructed questionnaire as well as basic demographic questions about sex, age and ethnicity was administered to youths from residential homes and from students in schools. The homes and the schools were visited by the questionnaire administrator. The participants were instructed to sit down and read the consent form carefully and to sign on it. Participants were free to ask any questions during the duration of doing the survey. This procedure lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Several months later, the researcher conducted focus group interviews. 52 focus group participants were randomly selected from the original pool of participants. Each group comprised of 6 to 10 youths. The focus group sessions were being recorded using a video camera.

Following data collection, student responses were entered into SPSS version 18 by the researcher.

RESULTS

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was conducted within each of the respective 5 broad areas to further identify the 'factors' that would impact on adolescents' ability to adjust socially. Across all 5 factor solutions, the KMO statistics obtained ranged between 0.79 to 0.94, which based on Kaiser's index of factorial simplicity (Kaiser, 1974, pp 35), it is deemed to be middling at least (KMO values in the 0.70s) and up to marvelous (KMO values in the 0.90s), thereby suggests that factor analysis would be appropriate.

The Bartlett test of sphericity, a statistical test for statistical probability that the correlation matrix has significant correlations among the variables (Hair et al., 1998), was observed to have p-value of 0. With this p-value, the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix is thus rejected and therefore demonstrated that there were some relationships among the statements. Factor analysis is also concluded to be appropriate in this instance.

In all five factor solutions, factors extracted were able to account for close to half or more than half of the variance in the model. The KMO statistic ranges between

Table 1: Factor analysis results of 5 broad factors

Broad area*	Factors extracted	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO)	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Sig.)	% of variance explained
Motivation in learning	2 Self-initiated learning behaviours Perception of education	0.830	0.000	54.3%
Sense of belonging towards the school	3 Perception toward school systems Perception toward school itself Perception toward school rules	0.798	0.000	65.8%
Perception of teachers	1	0.919	0.000	59.4%
Perception of peer support	2 Perception of peer-bonding Perception of peer	0.791	0.000	48.8%
Perception of family bonding	1	0.937	0.000	69.8%

0 and 1, where the closer the statistic is to 1, the more suitable it is to conduct factor analysis.

With regards to the item communalities, it is more common in the social sciences to observe low to moderate communalities of 0.40 to 0.70 (Costello and Osborne, 2005) and based on the factor analysis outputs for all five factor solutions most statements had communalities of at least 0.4. Factor loadings onto the respective factors were also found to be at least 0.30 and above, which was deemed to have met the minimal level (Hair, et. al., 1998) required for the item (statement in this context) to be significant on the factor. A total of 9 sets of factor scores were computed and subsequently used to establish if there were any differences in adaptability among the two groups of adolescents.

In summary, factor analysis yielded 9 factors from the original 5 broad factors (table 1).

Multivariate Analysis of Variance

A two-way between multivariate analysis of variance was performed to investigate age and group differences in social adjustment factors. Nine dependent variables were used: Self-initiated learning behaviours, Perception of education, Perception toward school systems, Perception toward school itself, Perception toward school rules, perception of teachers, perception of peer bonding, perception of peer and perception of family bonding. The

independent variables were age and group (residential care youths, non residential care youths). Preliminary assumption testing was conducted to check for normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices and multicollinearity with no serious violations noted. There was a statistically significant difference on the combined dependent variables: $F(9,456) = 4.097, p < .05$.

When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, the only differences to reach statistical significance were perception of teacher support and family bonding. An inspection of estimated marginal mean scores indicated that Youth in residential care generally have poorer perception of teacher's support ($EMM = -0.167$) than youth who are not in residential care ($EMM = -0.021$). However, youth in residential care scored higher on perception of family bonding ($EMM = .494$) than youth in non residential care ($EMM = -.162$).

There was a statistically significant effect ($F(9,456) = 2.32, p = .015$) for care group and age interaction, indicating that as age increase, RC youth showed greater willingness to take personal responsibility in learning but not for NRC group. The estimated marginal mean scores are as follows (table 2).

Focus group discussion results

When asked to describe their teachers in one word, NRC

Table 2: Interaction between age groups, NRC and RC youth

Dependent Variable	(I) Age	(J) Group	EM-Mean
Self- initiated learning behaviors	11-13	RC youth	-.542
		Non-RC youth	-.012
	14-16	RC youth	.100
		Non-RC youth	-.083
	17+	RC youth	.449
		Non-RC youth	. ^a

youth tended to describe teachers as helpful, caring, nice, and supportive. On other hand, RC youth tended to use word descriptors such as stupid, dumb, unreasonable.

NRC youth felt that teachers were important to them. For example: Teachers who were able to make learning fun helped to encourage students to do better in subjects. As a result, many more could excel in subjects that were perceived to be challenging. Such comments were mentioned by many other NRC youth. They also mentioned that teachers who went an extra mile: such as giving inspirational messages, additional tuition and giving past exam papers for revision were very much appreciated.

RC youth tended to provide negative feedback such as: Negative experience with teachers who have “misjudged/ or misunderstood” them for something they did not do. As such, they were “punished” unfairly. Also RC youth also mentioned that teacher overreacted on certain incidents, therefore, teachers were “unreasonable”.

When asked to describe their family in one word, NRC youth tended to describe their family as good, caring, important. They also expressed their wish to spend more “quality” time with their families, and requested for more “freedom” from their parents. The daily routine with family members did not constitute toward “quality” time. They would like to spend more time “together” with each other. Very often, they tend to stay in their rooms with little communication and time for bonding.

RC youth tended to use the words such as messed up, boring, unreasonable to describe their relationship with their families. Despite the negative descriptions about their family relationships, they expressed that they value their time spent with family members, and most of them expressed regret over their disobedience and wished that their family could become better. Several RC youths shared about how broken their families were, and wish that they could “reverse the time and make changes accordingly”. They also wished to have a better family.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this paper was to explore age and group (residential youths and non residential youths) differences of social adjustment factors.

Social adjustment in the context of the family

It has been found that the presence of parental care and warmth predicted cooperative and affiliative behavior and social competence in children (Hart et al., 1992). Youths from residential setting usually come from dysfunctional family backgrounds compared to the mainstream youths. Thus it was expected that NRC (Non residential care) youths would have better perception of family bonding compared to RC (Residential care) youths. However, our results showed that RC youth had a better perception of their families compared to NRC youths. In our focus group discussion with RC youths, RC youth reported that they value their time spent with family members, and most of them expressed regret over their disobedience and wish that their family could become better. Several of them also shared about how broken their families are, and wished that they could “reverse the time and make changes accordingly”. Due to their personal regret and desire for a better family, family relations may have improved based on the youth’s and their family members’ efforts, thus higher ratings on the perception of family bonding scale. Thus, it may be of interest for future research to investigate efforts in improving family relationships for this group of population.

Social adjustment in the context of peer relationships

No significant differences were found between RC and NRC youths on perception of peer support (perception of peer bonding and Perception of peer itself). Thus it appears that RC youth are socially adjusted in the area of

peer relationships. Although RC youths may do poorly academically and come from dysfunctional families, they may not necessarily mean it affects their ability to make and keep friends. Nevertheless, a more in depth investigation may be warranted to explore the quality of relationships these group of youths have with their peers. In addition, peer reports of relationship would increase validity of results.

Social adjustment in the context of the school

Among the three factors of teacher perception, motivation to learn and sense of belonging to school, a significant difference was found for teacher perception where RC youths viewed their teachers more negatively compared to NRC youths. In addition, as age increased, RC youth took greater responsibility in their learning.

Goh (1999) also found that RC youths in his sample viewed teachers more negatively compared to the NRC youths and explained that this could be due to RC youth's lack of academic interest and undesirable behaviours. Our focus group discussion with RC youth revealed that they had negative experiences with teachers who have "misjudged/ or misunderstood" them for something they did not do and as a result were "*punished*" unfairly. It was also mentioned that the teacher overreacted on certain incidents, therefore, viewing them as "unreasonable".

Willims (2000) found that perceiving positive teacher-student relationships positively affected student's sense of belonging to school. Even though RC youths' perception of teachers were significantly more negative compared with NRC youths, our results showed that RC youths' sense of belonging to school did not differ significantly from NRC youths. A possible explanation could be because good peer relationships in school helped to contribute to RC youths' sense of belonging to school.

Factor analysis of broad factor "Motivation to learn" yielded two factors namely Self-initiated learning behaviours and perception of education. There were no group or age differences for perceptions of education. However, as age increased, RC youths took greater self initiative in their learning. The results of this study did not corroborate with Lepper et al. (2005) study where they found that intrinsic motivation decreased as age increased. Lepper et al (2005) explained that the decrease could be because students find whatever is learnt is school to be irrelevant in their daily lives or that student's abilities, beliefs and goal orientations shift from positive and task focused to more pessimistic and performance based. Lepper's et al (2005) sample population is that of mainstream youths who generally fair well academically unlike the RC youths we sampled. Majority of RC youths do not do well academically throughout their schooling years and thus motivation to

learn has always been low. However, with intervention support at the residential care settings, such as compulsory schooling, case management system etc, motivation to learn could have increased. Future research may like to explore reasons and factors for this change in motivation for this group of population.

The study highlighted that perception of teachers is a factor that needs our attention. Thus, practitioners in the residential care setting who work directly with the youths may want to work in bringing counselling and guidance in this area as this factor affects their social adjustment. School personnel may also look at how they can improve teacher- student relationship for this group of population.

In order to better teacher and student relationship, Boys' Town is planning to have an orientation programme for new teachers of Assumption English School and Assumption Pathway School to help them understand better the profile of the boys from residential services as well as share some strategies on how to better relate to these youths. Boys' Town is also exploring the possibility of using strengths based approach in helping these youths. This approach promotes concepts of empowerment and resilience and not to focus too much on deficits of a person (Saleebey, 1996). For example, youth workers can capitalize on their hopes for a better family to encourage them in behavior change or in motivating them to study. Teachers and staff with a "possibility focused" mindset might help to balance out the common perception held by people who work with youth at risks that they will "always do wrong". This could help reduce incidences of "misunderstandings" between teacher and student.

CONCLUSION

In summary, while RC youths had a more negative perception of teacher compared to NRC, RC youths had a more positive perception of family bonding compared to NRC youths. For RC youths there was also an increase in self-initiated learning behaviors as age increased. In addition, RC youths' perception of peer relationships and sense of belonging to school did not differ much from NRC youths. Traditionally, one would expect youth at risk to face maladjustment in the 3 major spheres of family, peers and school. However, our results show that RC youths are not as maladjusted as expected. The results of the study lends support to the strengths based approach to youth work where the youth at risk is seen not only with the presenting behavioural and family issues but also their capacities, competencies values and hopes. This has practical implications for practice in youth work where one would not solely dwell on the problems or deficits of the youth but would draw on the positive to effect change in the youth.

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Appendix A

Provisional Survey

(ID: 6775)

Note that you are free to withdraw at any time or decline to answer particular questions without disadvantage. As you are answering the questions, remember that the questionnaire is *totally anonymous*. We do not ask you to give your name and nobody will be able to find out who has answered each questionnaire. We ask you to please answer questions *honestly* and *carefully*. When you are finished, the researcher will collect your questionnaire and place it in a sealed envelope.

Most of the questions ask you to *circle* the answer that best describes how you feel.

Here is an example of the questions you will be asked:

We ask you to circle the number that best describes how YOU feel about the following statement.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I enjoy playing Sport	1	2	3	4	5

A person who feels that he or she really enjoys playing sport would circle 1. Someone who does not enjoy playing sport just a little would circle 4.

Please complete the following and then begin the questionnaire.

1. What is your school level? _____
2. What is your age? _____ years old
3. Gender (please tick) _____ Female _____ Male
4. What is your main language spoken at home?
 1. English 2. Malay 3. Chinese 4. Tamil 5. Others _____
5. What is your race?
 1. Chinese 2. Malay 3. Indian 4. Eurasian 5. Others _____

Motivation towards learning

	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Doing homework helps me to learn more.	1	2	3	4	5
I work hard to prepare for my exams.	1	2	3	4	5
I want to go to school to get an education.	1	2	3	4	5
Though sometimes lessons are boring, I try to make the best of it.	1	2	3	4	5
I know that doing well in school can be a good stepping stone for my future.	1	2	3	4	5
I usually hand up my home work on time.	1	2	3	4	5
I ask questions when I don't understand what my teacher is teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
I know education is important for me.	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix A Cont.**Sense of belonging towards schools**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I obey the school rules.	1	2	3	4	5
I find it very difficult to follow the school rules.	1	2	3	4	5
I am proud of my school.	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy going to school.	1	2	3	4	5
I prefer to go to another school.	1	2	3	4	5
I take part in school activities.	1	2	3	4	5
School rules are important to maintain order in the school.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel that I need to go to school.	1	2	3	4	5

Perception of teacher

	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My teacher care about me.	1	2	3	4	5
I respect my teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers help me when I approach them for help.	1	2	3	4	5
I get along well with my teachers.	1	2	3	4	5
I can discuss thing with my teacher	1	2	3	4	5
I like my teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers understand me.	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers are fair to everyone else in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5

Perception of peer support

	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Most my friends are from my school.	1	2	3	4	5
I have many friends outside of school.	1	2	3	4	5
My friends understand me.	1	2	3	4	5
My classmates and I help each other in our schoolwork.	1	2	3	4	5
I can be influenced by my friends to do things that I do not want	1	2	3	4	5
I am closer to my friends than to my parents.	1	2	3	4	5
I have friends who will support me no matter what I do.	1	2	3	4	5
I have good relationship with my friends.	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix A cont.

Perception of family bonding

	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I have good relationship with my family members.	1	2	3	4	5
I am happy with my family.	1	2	3	4	5
I am close to my family.	1	2	3	4	5
I have respect for my family members.	1	2	3	4	5
Sometimes we go out together as a family	1	2	3	4	5
My parents understand me.	1	2	3	4	5
Family relationship is the most important of all relationships.	1	2	3	4	5
I can turn to my parents or siblings when I am in trouble.	1	2	3	4	5