Self-Esteem Development Through the Physical: In Search of the Theoretical Underpinning 通過體育提升自尊：理論基礎探究

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Abstract

School physical education is potentially able to help school children develop positive self-esteem because it provides the contexts for fulfilling the innate need for effectance, optimal challenges, and self-determination. In this paper, self-esteem was conceptualized to be multidimensional and hierarchical with its development following a bottom-up cognitive model. It was suggested that self-esteem development is self-directed in that, firstly, actual physical competence does not directly affect self-esteem but is subjectively interpreted and received to become physical self-perception that in turn affects self-esteem, and secondly, different individuals may adopt different conceptions of success and thus hold different standards for self-evaluation. Hence, the relevance of achievement orientations to self-esteem development through the physical was also discussed.

摘 要

學校體育提供機會，讓學童提升效能、挑戰自我、發揮自決、從而滿足其本能需要，具提升自尊之潛力。本文指出自尊屬多度向、多層級、具自我調控之心理結構。通過個人主觀的理解和認受，一切身體能力先要轉化成身體自我觀，然後才影響自尊。本文亦指出，不同人對所謂成功有不同理解，並因而採用不同標準評價自己；同時，目標取向與提升自尊的關係亦為本文之討論重點。

Introduction

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has started reviewing the education system in Hong Kong and formulated reform proposals for the development of education in the 21st Century with the intention to create more room for schools, teachers and students, to offer an all-round and balanced education (Education Committee, 2000). Subsequently, it was proposed in the new curriculum framework that school children should gain a balanced exposure in eight key learning areas, of which physical education has also been included (Curriculum Development Council, 2000).

Although both “education of the physical” and “education about the physical” constitute important components of Physical

Education programmes, they serve to enhance holistic development of the students, rather than to develop skills, physical fitness, and knowledge in the PE subject per se. It has been suggested and supported with evidence that improvement in physical competence led to self-esteem development (Fox, 2000; Gruber, 1980; Leith, 1994; Sonstroem, 1984; Sonstroem & Morgan, 1989). From the psychological perspective, self-esteem relates to self-evaluation (Brown, 1998) and is “the awareness of good possessed by the self” (Campbell, 1984, p. 9). Thus, it is possible that by making school children aware of their good in the physical domain (i.e., helping them develop positive physical self-perceptions), school PE can promote self-esteem. This paper reviewed the theoretical underpinning of this proposition. It was hoped that by clarifying the concerned issues, physical educators would be better informed in their practices when designing and implementing school PE programmes.

Self-Directed Self-Esteem Development

Modern psychologists believe that in each person there is a self-system that is able to regulate self-related thoughts, feelings, and motives. Hoyle, Kernis, Leary, and Baldwin (1999), for example, suggested that the self was composed of multiple components that were meaningfully organized into a stable, cohesive, functioning whole. The "I-Me" distinction raised by James (1892/1962) clearly implied a conceptualization of "self-director" that was able to be aware of and to direct its own perception, sensation, and thinking processes. Bandura (1986, 1997) contended that the self had symbolizing, forethought, vicarious, self-regulatory, and self-reflective capabilities that enabled individuals to generate innovative ideas, anticipate the likely consequences of actions, set goals, plan courses of action for cognized futures, acquire rules for generating and regulating behavioural patterns without relying on trials and errors, be motivated and regulated by internal standards and self-evaluation, analyze their experiences and thought processes, and derive generic knowledge about themselves and the world around them.

Although the self was also conceptualized as a mirror of social evaluations (e.g., Cooley, 1902/1964; Mead, 1934), its active agency and synthetic tendency are apparent. Studies have been conducted to examine how the self planned and interpreted behaviours pertaining to values (Moretti & Higgins, 1999; Rose, 1999), principles (Carver & Scheier, 1982), and goals (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998; Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995). The self tended to be hedonistic and made way to feel good and to maximize the feelings of self-worth (Brown, 1993). Self-serving biases were well documented (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; De Michele, Gansneder, & Solomon, 1998). Harter (1993) noted that the "I" worked hard to maintain high esteem and actively constructed, packaged, protected, and enhanced the "Me". Deci and Ryan (1991) contended that the self was intrinsically motivated and engaged in a proactive process of knowing itself.

With the understanding of the self-directing mechanism, self-esteem development may be viewed as a somewhat conscious decision school children make regarding their worth as a person. It is not likely that the school children are only passively receiving the school PE programmes, but rather, they are more likely to be actively interacting with the environment, their own behaviours, and the cognitions that take place in their self-systems. Effects of school PE programmes on individuals can be varied, depending on how the self-director in each of their self-systems captures, interprets, integrates, and generalizes the information derived from their experiences. Some school children may be able to be aware of their good while the others may be aware of their bad, particularly

at times when they are engaged in competitive events where winners are few.

Dweck (1999, p. 128) said, "self-esteem is not something we give them. It is something that they are in charge of, and we can simply teach them how to live their lives so that they will experience themselves in positive ways". Hence, to ensure success in self-esteem development through the physical, school PE programmes should be child-centered and physical educators must learn how the self operates.

A Bottom-up Cognitive Model of Self-Esteem Development

Currently, there has been an increased emphasis on the multidimensional and hierarchical characteristics of self-perception (Harter, 1985b, 1999; Marsh, 1990; Marsh, Relich, & Smith, 1983; Marsh, Richard, & Barnes, 1986). In the physical domain, Fox and Corbin (1989) proposed the 3-Tier Model of Self-Perception that comprised global self-esteem at the apex, physical self-worth in the middle, and four physical self-perception sub-domains (sport competence, physical condition, body attractiveness, and physical strength) at the bottom (see Figure 1). It was hypothesized that self-esteem was organized in a multidimensional and hierarchical manner and that the more specific physical self-perception sub-domains aggregated and formed the more general physical self-worth that eventually affected the global self-esteem.

Note. This diagram shows the hypothetical 3-Tier Model of Self-Perception (Fox & Corbin, 1989) that depicts the relationships among global self-esteem (GSE), physical self-worth (PSW), perceived sport competence (SPO), perceived physical condition (CON), perceived body attractiveness (BOD), and perceived physical strength (STR).

Figure 1. A Cognitive Model for Self-Esteem Development through the Physical.

When discussing self-esteem development through the physical, actually two levels of self-esteems are being referred. They are the self-esteem at global sense (global self-esteem) and the self-esteem in the physical domain (physical self-worth). The 3-Tier Model of Self-Perception (Fox & Corbin, 1989) has been well supported with data collected in western cultures using correlation analyses (Asci, Asci, & Zorba, 1999; Biddle et al., 1993; Fox, 1990; Fox & Corbin, 1989; Page, Ashford, Fox, & Biddle, 1993) as well as structural equation modeling techniques (Crocker, Eklund, & Kowalski, 2000; Marsh, 1996b; Marsh & Redmayne, 1994; Marsh & Richards, 1994; Marsh, 1997; Sonstroem, Harlow, & Josephs, 1994; Sonstroem, Harlow, & Salisbury, 1993; Whitehead, 1995). Recently, the model was also tested in Hong Kong Chinese junior secondary school children (N=1,301) and good model fit was attained (Chow, 2001).

The 3-Tier Model of Self-Perception (Fox & Corbin, 1989) helps explain how school PE can be functional in self-esteem development: School PE enables school children to develop physical competence such as sport skills and physical fitness and thus helps them form more positive physical self-perception that in turn brings about more positive self-esteem. Why, then, does the development of physical competence lead to more positive self-esteem?

The Innate Need for Effectance, Optimal Challenges, and Self-Determination

White (1959) and other theorists (e.g. Connell, 1990; DeCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Harter, 1978; Koestner & McClelland, 1990) argued that all humans were born with an intrinsic desire to interact effectively with the environment and so to experience themselves as competent in producing desired and preventing undesired events. White (1959) labeled the intrinsic desire "effectance motivation", the corresponding affect "feeling of efficacy", and one's capacity for effective interactions with the environment "competence" and suggested that effectance motivation aimed for the feeling of efficacy with the development of competence, not for anything that came as its consequence.

To bring about feeling of efficacy, it is not enough just to be successful in interacting with the environment (i.e., merely competent). Harter (1978) proposed to breakdown the effectance motivation into three components, preference for challenge, curiosity, and independent mastery. Deci (1975) suggested that the innate need for competence led people to seek and conquer challenges that were optimal for their capacities, and that competence acquisition resulted from interacting with stimuli that were challenging. Being optimally challenged, irrespective of its kind, is a prerequisite

of feeling competent. Hence, when one is experiencing the feeling of efficacy that comes as a result of fulfilling the innate need of competence, one is more or less experiencing the "flow state", which, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Jackson (2000), is characterized by a) a feeling of being in control of the life at that point of time, b) action and awareness are highly merged that make the experience almost spontaneous and automatic, c) the focus is on the task at hand and forget any unpleasant activities and distractions from the environment, and d) the ego motives had been put away.

DeCharms (1968), like White (1959), also proposed that all humans had an innate need to be effective in producing changes in the environment, but he emphasized on humans' strive for personal causation: "Man strives to be a causal agent, to be the primary locus of causation for, or the origin of, his behaviour" (p. 269). Deci (1971, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985) conducted studies on the effects of external rewards on the innate need for competence and concluded that external rewards might undermine the innate need for competence when they detracted from the individual's sense of autonomy and initiative. The difference between the need to control the environment and the need to be self-determining should be noted. Control refers to the contingency between behaviour and outcome, whereas, self-determination refers to the experience of freedom in initiating behaviour.

Self-esteem is a feeling of worth, like or dislike towards the self as a result of self-evaluation. As discussed earlier, it seems that all humans have the innate need for competence that comprises effectance, optimal challenges, and self-determination. Fulfilling this innate need leads to inherent pleasure and pride (Harter, 1978; White, 1959) that form the basis of positive self-esteem (Bandura, 1997; Brown, 1998; Chan, 2000; Cheung & Tam, 1984; Harter, 1999; Rosenberg, 1965). School PE not only provides chances for school children to develop physical competence, but also a wide variety of physical activities that are intrinsically motivated to them. A number of studies have shown that most young people participate in physical activities mainly for pleasure or fun (Gould, Feltz, & Weiss, 1985; Government of Canada, 1983; Lindner, 1999; McCullagh, Matzkanin, Shaw, & Maldonado, 1993; Pierce, 1984). Further more, school PE offers challenging environments in the format of structured sports and games for school children to interact with. At times when competence optimally matched with the challenges, school children can experience the feeling of efficacy that may accompany the "flow state". In most cases, other than regular PE classes in which a more confined curriculum may be followed, school children can have choices in deciding which activities to join, with whom to play, and at what difficulty level to commence.

Apparently, by providing appropriate contexts and empowerment measures school PE helps school children fulfill their innate need for competence and thus is potentially functional in the self-esteem development process. Of course, in real circumstances, whether or not school PE can accomplish the self-esteem development task depends very much on the available resources and how it is implemented. It should be noted that school PE experiences could also be detrimental to self-esteem development if it is not properly organized.

Subjectively Evaluated Physical Competence

Although efficacy feelings may arise from the development of physical competence, it is equally likely that the development of physical competence does not bring about efficacy feelings. Physical self-perception, be it specific or general, is not plain reflection of actual physical competence, but instead, is the outcome of a personal and subjective judgment (Sonstroem, 1984; Sonstroem, 1997; Sonstroem, Harlow, & Josephs, 1994; Sonstroem & Morgan, 1989).

In one study Janoski, Holmes, Soloman, and Aguiar (1981) found that the changes in physical fitness and perceived physical competence were not significantly correlated though both of them were found improved. In another study, Marsh and Peart (1988) found the effect of an adventure-based education program to be low on physical ability self-concept but high on actual physical fitness, as measured immediately after the completion of the programme. These two examples clearly showed that the improvement in physical competence did not necessarily bring about improvement in self-perception. In the study conducted by Marsh and Peart (1988), follow-up measures were taken after the participants had returned home for some time. Interestingly, the follow-up measures of the physical ability self-concept increased to very high even the actual physical fitness declined. One likely reason for such discrepancy is that when the measures were taken immediately at the completion of the programme, the participants compared themselves to other programme participants whose physical performance were equally well or more superior but when the follow-up measures were taken some time later, the participants compared themselves to the people in their immediate frame of reference but not to other program participants.

Hence, whether or not one accepts oneself depends on what criteria one holds. Winning/losing or getting high/low grades per se are not adequate in determining achievement-related affect or cognitive or behavioural reactions. Rather, how one conceptualizes success is important. Carrying different standards and criteria

for evaluation, even with the same level of achievement as reflected by some objective indicators, one may accept oneself as very good and thus holds high self-esteem while the other may not accept oneself as good enough and thus holds only medium or even low self-esteem.

Achievement Orientation and Self-Esteem

Many researchers (Nicholls 1984, 1992; Nicholls, Cheung, Lauer, & Patashnick, 1989a; Nicholls, Patashnick, Cheung, Thorkilsen, & Lauer, 1989b; Nicholls, Patashnick, & Nolen, 1985) argued that task orientation and ego orientation represented different conceptions of success, different reasons for approaching and engaging in achievement activities, and different ways of thinking about oneself, one's task, and task outcomes. With the adoption of task orientation, effort and ability are conceived as the same thing and high ability means being successful in difficult tasks where failure is likely. In such an occasion, level of ability is judged in relation to one's own perceived mastery, understanding, or knowledge, and is self-referenced. With the adoption of ego orientation, however, ability is conceived as capacity. Level of ability is judged with reference to a normative reference group, with high ability meaning above average and low ability meaning below average, and thus is other-referenced. Demonstration of high ability requires being successful on tasks that most others fail.

Research evidence showed that task orientation was adaptive and generally related to positive physical self-perceptions. For example, in one study, Kavussanu and Roberts (1996) found that task orientation, but not ego orientation, related to high self-efficacy for performing selected tennis strokes in beginning tennis class college students. In another study, Vlachopoulos, Biddle, and Fox (1996) found that task orientation could boost perceived physical competence, whereas, the effect of ego orientation on perceived competence, though also significant, was weak. It is likely that in school PE task-oriented school children could use more subjective and self-determining information such as progress and effort to judge their performance, thus making them more likely to feel competent and successful. Considering the above and other similar findings, Roberts (2001, p. 21) concluded, "A task orientation fosters perceptions of competence and success for individual who are either high or low in perceived competence and encourages the exertion of effort. An ego orientation, on the other hand, may decrease perceptions of success, perceived competence, and thus effort, especially for those individuals who already are unsure of their ability". So, to promote task orientation in school PE appears to be one necessary measures accompanying self-esteem development through the physical initiatives.

Conclusion

In this paper, the theoretical underpinning of self-esteem development through school PE has been discussed. Firstly, it was made clear that self-esteem development through the physical follows a cognitive model of which physical self-perception sub-domains aggregate and form physical self-worth that in turn affects global self-esteem. Secondly, it was argued that school PE is potentially able to help school children develop positive self-esteem because it provides the contexts for fulfilling the innate need for competence, which comprises effectance, optimal challenges, and self-determination. Thirdly, it was pointed out that actual physical competence does not directly affect self-esteem but is subjectively interpreted and received to become physical self-perception that then affects self-esteem. Fourthly, with the adoption of task orientation (i.e., with the intention of improving ability rather than demonstrating ability) in physical activity participation, more positive physical self-perception and self-esteem can be anticipated.

It is not common for physical educators to explicitly specify in their teaching plans and schemes of work on the particular objective of developing positive self-esteem to be done in a teaching period, theme, or unit, not to say intentionally design and incorporate relevant self-esteem development activities in school PE. Physical educators normally focus on the motor domain, such as sport skill teaching and physical fitness training, and pay much less attention to the affective domain. Maybe some physical educators prefer to give personal guidance to students in need or to refer their students to some other specifically designed self-esteem development programmes. In such cases, however, these physical educators miss the chances to provide a holistic education through normal PE opportunities and thus have undermined the education value of PE.

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