A Qualitative Study of Self-Esteem, Peer Affiliation, and Academic Outcome among Low

Achieving Students in Hong Kong

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Introduction

In Hong Kong, the general expectation of academic achievement is extremely high, and much

appreciation and attention are given to the best students in the classroom (Salili, Lai & Leung,

2004). Tong and Clem (2007), writing in the *South China Morning Post*, stated that the Hong Kong

education system did not provide enough opportunities for low-achieving students. During critical

stages in their educational careers, the rank of schools often classifies students' levels based on

their academic performance. Low-achieving (LA) students are, in one way or another, still being

neglected and misunderstood for not trying hard enough and left without support and guidance by

their parents and teachers (Chen, Chen, Kaspar & Noh, 2000).

A limited amount of research has been conducted on children and adolescents who are low

achievers. In Hong Kong, educators describe LA students in terms of academic performance, they

seldom focus on socio-emotional aspects, such as self-esteem, peer affiliation, and inter-personal

relationships. However, LA students could also be described differently in different contexts.

Students who experience difficulties academically are characterized as having difficulties in

studying, completing assignments and organizing information. In terms of socio-emotional aspects,

students may experience difficulties in interpersonal relationships with peers and adults and they are likely to engage in rule-breaking behaviours. In terms of motivational aspects, these students do not see the benefits of their efforts and have difficulty in setting and attaining goals (Akos & Galassi, 2004). LA students seem to display lower self-esteem and more behavioural problems than average-achieving or high-achieving students (Ledingham & Schwartzman, 1984). Humphrey et al. (2004) found differences between high- and low-achieving students in a variety of constructs, including academic self-esteem, mood/affect, and global self-esteem. There is evidence to suggest that positive self-esteem can facilitate desirable academic achievement (Chapman, 1988; Marsh, Bryne & Yeung, 1999). The most widely accepted model of the primary relationship between self-esteem and educational outcomes is that it is reciprocal (Marsh & Yeung, 1998). Peer relationships have been identified as a context for the development of self-esteem, social competence, and academic achievement (Hartup, 1996; Ladd, 1999). Peer relationships may also provide adolescents with opportunities for intimate disclosure, validation, support and security (Furman & Robins, 1985; Ladd, 1999), which might be deficient or lacking in parent-adolescent relationships. Newman and Newman (1976) postulated that peer affiliation is uniformly high during early adolescence, and being accepted by peers is essential to maintaining positive self-esteem. However, changes in peer affiliation indicated that adolescents' social contacts with peers initially decreased from primary to the beginning of middle school but recovered by the end of the year (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001). Secondly, peer-based strategies have been widely used in all kinds of educational

settings over the last few decades (Cartwright, 2007; Cowie et al., 2002). It is recognized that peer support is a useful approach (Bond & Castagnera, 2006; Snell & Janney, 2000) in inclusive education. Most researchers (Bond & Castagnera, 2006; Haager & Vaughn, 1995; Snell & Janney, 2000; Valas, 1999) have focused on the application of a peer support approach for students with learning disabilities but with less emphasis on LA students. Thirdly, the measures of peer affiliation and self-esteem in the previous findings (Alves-Martins et al., 2002; Jenkins, 1996; Valas, 1999) were all self-reported by adolescents. When using self-reported data one should always be aware that social desirability response biases skew individuals' reports (Lansford et al., 2003).

Therefore, this study attempts to explore the impact of the transitions from primary school to secondary school among LA students on their peer affiliation and the reciprocal effect of self-esteem and academic outcomes, using data triangulation (different times and different reporters) and methodological triangulation (different methods, i.e., observation, journal entries, portfolios and interviews).

Indeed, many LA students in the past and even today have had their academic needs neglected by their parents and the school system. In order to help society gain awareness, through this study, there is a need to allow the LA students to articulate their hidden feelings and take off their invisible masks.

Research background

This study took place in a secondary school which provides a peer support programme for

students in the transition from primary school who have difficulties with school adjustment.

Fourteen students were referred by their teachers to participate in this peer support programme,

which ran from early December to late April 2008. Seven of the students, from a senior form, were

recruited as student mentors and the other seven pupils were all in secondary form one, but with

diverse backgrounds. This study aimed to develop a better understanding about the complex world

of LA students (Zambo, 2004) and how the peer support programme, in terms of the interaction

with teachers and peers, may influence these students both personally and interpersonally (Chen,

French, & Schneider, 2006).

Literature Review

It is generally accepted that the most remarkable social phenomenon of adolescence is

affiliation with peer groups. Peers increasingly play an important role during the adolescent period

among the lives of young people (Azmitia, Ittel & Radmacher, 2005; Wigfield, Lutz & Wagner,

2005). As adolescents make the transition to high school, peer networks increase, and peer

affiliation becomes an important aspect of peer relations (La Greca & Printsein, 1999). Also during

adolescence, close friends begin to surpass parents as adolescents' primary source of social support

and contribute in important ways to adolescents' self-esteem and well-being (La Greca & Harrison,

2005). Positive peer affiliation is essential to maintaining positive self-esteem (Brown & Lohr,

1987). The primary relationship between self-esteem and educational outcomes is one of reciprocal

effects (Marsh & Yeung, 1998), and Zimmerman (2003) indicated that peer effects are strongly associated with SAT scores. Since peer affiliation affects both students' self-esteem and academic outcomes, therefore, it is believed that a peer support programme which could promote students' self-esteem and academic outcomes with peer affiliation is worth investigating.

Peer affiliations in adolescence

Peer affiliation has been defined in terms of the number of reciprocally nominated friends, 'like most' nominations, and 'isolate' nominations (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Friendship quality and peer affiliation serve as protective factors for adolescents exposed to unilateral parental decision making and this peer group affiliation serve as a buffer for adolescents exposed to low supervision and awareness of their needs (Schmidt & Bagwell, 2007).

Self-esteem in adolescence

Self-esteem may be most vulnerable during the early phase of secondary school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Lohaus, Elben, Ball & Klein-Hessling, 2004). This seems to be particularly true because early adolescents experience several transitions during this period in terms of changes of school, and changes in family and peer relations (Akos, 2002; Chen, French & Schneider, 2006). During the period of early adolescence, the desire for a positive quality of friendship and peer acceptance are always the major concerns.

Numerous research findings have confirmed the link between self-esteem and young adolescents' peer affiliation (Brown, 2004; Hoffman, Ushpiz & Levy-Shiff, 2005; Thomas &

Daubman, 2001). Peers play a very significant role in adolescents' self-esteem; the individual who

has higher self-esteem is characterized as having positive peer affiliations (Berndt, 2002).

Humphrey et al. (2004) found that LA children perceived academic competence, social

acceptance, athletic competence, and physical appearance to be more important than did high

achieving children. High-achieving pupils perceived behavioral conduct to be significantly more

important did LA children. Academic competence was significantly more likely to be a negative

source of self-esteem for LA pupils than it was for high-achieving pupils. However, the most

pertinent of these was the finding that academic competence was significantly more important to

the LA group than it was to the high-achieving group (Alves-Martins et al., 2002; Humphrey et al.,

2004). High-achieving pupils are more likely to take their academic competence for granted. In

McPherson and Schapiro's study (1990), the increase in learning achieved by moving a weak (LA)

student to a peer-rich environment exceeds the loss in learning from moving a strong student to a

peer-poor environment. Peer affiliation plays an essential role to enhance students' self-esteem and

academic outcomes.

Peer affiliation and self-esteem in adolescence

The interplay of peer and family influences may be especially salient during early adolescence

for two reasons. First, as children enter adolescence, they spend increasingly more time with peers

than in previous years (Larson & Richards, 1991). Second, the nature of peer relationships changes

during adolescence (Berndt, 1996); there is an increase in intimate disclosure among friends

(Berndt & Savin-Williams, 1993), and cliques become more defined (Croclett, Losoff & Petersen, 1984). When adolescents go through the developmental crisis, school serves as a social context that enables early adolescents to shape the quality and character of their identities as students (Azmitia, Ittel & Radmacher, 2005; Roeser & Lau, 2002). Peer feedback may enhance or depreciate their self-esteem. Self-esteem is heavily influenced by one's position within the peer group. Higher peer-rated status is associated with both higher self-esteem and greater salience attributed to peer affiliation (Cooley, 1902).

Peer support programmes for youth

Over the last few decades, peer-based strategies have been widely used in all kinds of educational settings (Cartwright, 2007; Cowie et al., 2002). It is recognized that peer support is a useful approach in inclusive education (Bond & Castagnera, 2006; Snell & Janney, 2000). However, previous studies and their findings have placed little emphasis on LA students.

As previously mentioned, early adolescents' self-esteem may be particularly vulnerable at transition times in the middle school years. Peers have a powerful impact on a student's academic experience, social skills and self-esteem (Cowie et al., 2002; Ryan, 2001). In peer support programmes, students can be developed into finding a caring, supportive and sharing atmosphere in school (Colvin, 2007). Research studies (Johnson, 2008; Shore, Toyokawa & Anderson 2008) indicated that peer mentoring could apply in a wide range of school levels; the aim is to help the first-year students to cope with the school transition effectively so as to enhance their social skills

and academic performance (Budge, 2006; Rhodes & Lowe, 2008). Therefore, the peer support programme provides a secure and warm learning atmosphere with clear guidance for the students helping them to adapt to the new environment quickly.

In relation to the peer support programme, peer tutoring has a positive impact on academic outcomes in secondary settings (Budge, 2006) such as reading, spelling and writing (Cooper, 2007; Medcalf, Glynn & Moore, 2004; Mastropieri & Scruggs &, 2007). Based on the qualities of the peer support programme, this present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of a peer support programme in enhancing young adolescents' peer affiliations, self-esteem and academic performance.

Purpose of the study

Previous findings have often shown that the peer support programme has a significant effect on the peer relationship, self-esteem and academic outcomes separately and specifically. Based on the previous findings, when measuring the effectiveness of the programme, the sample size was too large, with a wide age group (Dillon & Swinbourne, 2007; Reddy, Rhodes & Mulhall, 2003). Measuring peer effects is difficult. Student outcomes depend on a myriad of factors other than the characteristics of one's peers, while it is also important to acknowledge the individual's characteristics. Therefore, the following study will use data triangulation (different times and different reporters) and methodological triangulation (different methods, i.e., observation, journal entries, portfolios, and interviews) to study how the peer support programme enables them to gain

positive self-esteem and better academic performance.

Method

We undertook this study at a millennium secondary school in Hong Kong. We collected data

from participant observation, journal entries (conversations with students and trainers), students'

portfolios of written work, rating checklists by the trainers and researchers, and interviews with

teachers followed by questionnaires.

Participants

The study used a time-series design with a sample of seven participants (five girls and two

boys) coming from a Band 3 secondary school aged between 12 and 13 years enrolled in the Peer

Support Programme. Due to problems they were having with school adjustment and academic

problem (most of them are bottom 10 students), these seven first-year students were recommended

by their class teachers to attend this programme. Another seven students, aged between 15 and 17

years, were recruited from senior forms to act as student mentors. The leader of the peer support

programme was a trainer who designed and ran the programme in the school. The three teachers

who had referred their pupils were interviewed about the participants' peer relations, self-esteem,

and academic performance before and after the programme.

Setting

Our Peer Support Programme was held three times a week during lunch break in a controlled

environment in order to ensure the credibility of the research findings (Camic, Rhodes & Yardley,

2003; William, 2006).

Since the seating plan is very flexible, students are encouraged to meet in small groups, ranging from two to four people. They are also assigned as mentors (senior form students) and mentees (junior form students) to sit together for peer-reading.

Materials

Participant observation was used to understand students' self-esteem and peer affiliation, including conversations with the students in the research setting and online chat-room (journal entries). Likewise, content analysis was employed to compare the views among the students, teachers and trainers through rating checklists, structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Students' academic performance was evaluated by the students' portfolios of written performance and rating checklists of academic performance by the trainer and researcher.

This research also applied a self-report checklist with a 4-point scale (1 = Poor, 2 = Fair, 3 = Good, and 4 = Excellent) to evaluate the effectiveness of the peer support programme.

Procedure

The study is divided into two phases of data collection. The first phase of data collection included progress of the students' writing performance, and feedback of writing performance from the teachers and the trainer.

The second phase of data collection comprised journal entries and conversations with participants, face-to-face structured interviews, and rating checklists of students' academic

outcomes, self-esteem, and peer affiliation by the trainer and researcher.

Journal entries. In the beginning, the students were very reluctant to open up. As time went

by, trust and reciprocity were developed between the researcher and the participants (DeWalt &

DeWalt, 2002; Johnson, 2008). The journal entries were concerned more with the personal

conversations with the participants.

Face-to-face interviews. The data collected from participating teachers was based on face-to-

face structured interviews and open-ended survey responses. The length of interviews ranged from

15 to 35 minutes, with the majority lasting about 25 minutes. The teachers and the programme

trainer were invited for the interview. The questions were generated from the literature review and

site observation.

Rating checklist. Rating checklists by the researcher and trainer were used to gain a complete

picture about the progress and outcome of students' academic performance, self-esteem and peer

affiliation.

Data from different sources, such as journal entries, face-to-face interviews of teachers and

trainer, conversations with students, and rating checklists were collected to ensure the reliability

and validity of the study.

Data analysis

After collecting all the data, the teachers' feedback on writing performance, journal entries of

students' conversations and participant observation were analysed by using content analysis. We

transformed the data into working documents that could be coded as more quantifiable in terms of the major themes and conducted further data analysis (Ghesquiere, Maes & Vandenberghe, 2004).

Results

The results will be presented in two parts. Part A provides a demographic description of the participants and Part B provides details about the participants' (students, teachers, trainer, and researchers) evaluation of the effectiveness of the peer support programme.

PART A

Demographic data

Table 1 showed that most of the participants in this study are female students (71.3%), and they were all aged 12 or 13 years. Five out of seven (71.3%) were living in a supportive family environment, the other two experienced poor family relations.

[Insert table 1 about here]

Table 2 shows the participation rate of students from time 1 to time 3. Time 1 was from 6 December 2007 to 26 January 2008, time 2 was from 13 February to 26 March 2008, and time 3 was from 28 March to 25 April 2008. Case 2 and Case 3 showed high and stable attendance rates throughout the entire time series, Case 1 and Case 7 showed low attendance rates and were withdrawn from the programme during time 3.

[Insert table 2 about here]

PART B

Multi-raters' evaluation of the effectiveness of the peer support programme

Table 3 and Table 4 showed that parental support plays a significant role in students' self-perception, learning motivation and academic performance in time 1. In time 2, all the teachers shared a consensus of rating the three most important outcomes; love and belonging, fun, and freedom for the students, while they stated that there were not significant changes in their students' academic performance. Two of the teachers claimed that "the programme is a warm and trusting place where students could gain mutual support and acceptance with their peers". There was greater variation among the students' behavioural outcomes in time 3, while they claimed that their students' peer affiliation was enhanced through gaining better social skills from the programme.

[Insert tables 3 and 4 about here]

Table 5 shows the items that were rated as 'good' by the trainer and researcher. In terms of evaluating the trainer's teaching strategies and effectiveness of programme as well as observing the overall process of participants' academic and psychological wellbeing, there was inter-rater agreement between the trainer and the researcher. Through the observation of students' interaction in the setting, the relationship between the mentors and mentees (participants) and peer relationships can be evaluated. Also, having a positive and mutual alliance should foster them to do better in their learning (Case 3 was one of the examples). Overall, the peer support programme helped these participants to enhance their self-esteem and peer affiliation. The peer support network and environment was established successfully among these students.

[Insert table 5 about here]

Tables 6 to 8 illustrated the overall picture of each student's achievements in terms of self-

esteem, peer affiliations and academic performance. In this study, four assessors, the students (participants), teachers, trainer and researcher, evaluated the students' performance in terms of the academic, social and emotional outcomes after joining the peer support programme. The students were constantly encouraged to look at themselves, while the researcher mainly focused on and independently evaluated the consistency among these four assessors. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, there should be a high level of agreement between assessors. Thus, along with the researcher's own observation, the researcher assessed the consistency and variability among these three assessors in their ratings based on the information that provided.

[Insert tables 6 to 8 about here]

Discussion

Research Implication

This study presented three major themes that arose from the data and supporting quotes from the students, trainer and teachers. As shown in this section, a qualitative method could be the best way to get to know about the life experience of the individuals who are viewed to be low-achievers. The only way to conduct the study was to understand their actual life experience.

Triangulation Discrepancy.   When evaluating many aspects of a person in terms of self-esteem, academic achievements, and social competence, we found a great disparity between teachers' perceptions and participants' perceptions in those three areas. The discrepancy occurred because the expectations of the teachers and the participants are so different. According to Case 4

and Case 5, their teachers 'are harsh and crazy, and they do not understand their students' personal needs'. However, the teachers claimed that they have very thorough understanding of the participants during the interview session. They also said that they had provided the students with extra time in tutoring and helped them to deal with their studies and conflicts with other classmates. Meanwhile, the trainer observed that these students, especially Case 3 who had recently experienced a great disappointment in her studies, were adversely affected by negative feedback from the teachers. These data collected from different sources showed that the teachers seldom focus on their students' inner feelings. Therefore, low quality of the teacher-student relationship led to a great discrepancy between the teachers' and students' perceptions. During the conversations with the participants, quite a number of them had mentioned that their relationship with teachers is terrible, and they hoped that 'the teachers could show us respect and treat us like a friend'. One of the participants said, 'I've got a mother who is always nagging me at home, I don't want to have another mother in school'. Consistent with the research findings, the quality of teacher-student relationship has a strong impact on adolescents' self-esteem and academic outcomes (O'Connor, 2007; Wentzel, 2002), a good teacher-student relationship not only focuses on their learning outcomes, but also concerns the trust relationship with the students. By possessing the three qualities of understanding, acceptance and warmth like a 'friend', both teachers and participants gain reflection from their trust relationship, whereby they strive to decrease the disparity of perception and occurrence of conflict.

Permanently Scarred. During the participant observation, there were many complaints from the participants about their teachers for being so intolerant and unsympathetic. Some of them screamed aloud; some said it silently; some of them had a sullen look on their faces. All these emotions and conversations were observed during time series 2, when the students had completed their mid-term exams While talking with these participants, the expression and dialogues among them implied many hidden meanings. One of the participants told me that she is being humiliated by the teacher in front of the whole class because of getting a very low grade in her exam. Another student complained that the teachers called her 'dummy' because she could not even spell the simple word 'aeroplane' correctly. All these dialogues were not created, but rather are factual data, actually spoken by these 'naive' participants. A number of research studies (O'Connor, 2007; Wentzel, 2002) indicated that teachers' feedback strongly influences the way the students perceive sense of competency in school settings. In this study, the participants' sense of inferiority and other complex emotions were noted as being due to teachers' negative feedback. It is essential for these participants to cope with these inner feelings, because a prolonged period of suppression could create a permanent scar which may affect other aspects of their lives later.

Ventilation Zone. It is agreed among three assessors, the teachers, participants, and the trainer, that the peer support programme serves as a means of gaining mutual support and acceptance. When asked to describe their feelings about the classroom and the peer support programme, many of the participants said, 'We like it here because we have friends here and have a lot of fun here

without any rules'. This shows that the programme has fulfilled these participants' psychological needs in terms of having a sense of belonging (Stumpers et al., 2005). Also, it is reported by the teachers and students that students received the peer support service well as it made them 'feel safe and being supported'. Compared with the actual classroom setting, the atmosphere is totally different. Once during a session of the peer support programme, a participant complained that their teachers are not attentive to the students' needs. Another described the classroom atmosphere as very competitive among the classmates. This shows that the actual classroom setting has made these participants feel suffocated so that they show some avoidance and misconduct behaviour. During the participant observations, the participants were reluctant to leave because they enjoyed the 'freedom' and 'friendship' that they gained from the setting. Consistent with the research findings (Lapan, Gysbers & Petroski, 2003), the teachers, participants, trainer and researcher rated the peer support programme as a safe and comfortable environment with strong sense of belongingness and acceptance. Meanwhile, these participants showed that they are more willing to try out new things and make more effort. Consistent with the previous findings, the peer support programme improves 'the availability, accessibility and appropriateness of young and personal supports' (Dillon & Swinbourne, 2007).

Additionally, findings concerning the limitations and implications of the study are provided below.

Limitations of the study

Two major limitations need to be acknowledged and addressed with regard to the present study. The first limitation concerns the existence of uncontrollable factors in terms of the research setting, and that participants could influence the reliability and validity of evaluating the effectiveness of the programme. Overall, the participants' attendance rate dropped gradually. External and internal factors may lead to them not being willing to attend the programme. Since these participants were obligated by the teachers to join the programme, their motivation was relatively low because they did not have a chance to make the decision. Therefore, these participants' attendance rate and behaviour fluctuated. Similarly, the teachers who participated in this study had a heavy workload, they were not always able to spend time on the interviews, while their feedback in the questionnaires did not sufficiently evaluate the participants' progress.

The second limitation was insufficient time for follow up and reflection upon dialogue submitted by other participants. This was a very short-duration study, lasting only five months from initial entry into the school setting to final site visit. Also, the researcher undertook the observation about once a week. It was not totally accurate to evaluate the participants from what could be observed based on visiting once a week. Many things could happen throughout the week, which might have upset the participants' attendance rate and behaviours. There was generally insufficient time to conduct a full baseline assessment and follow up sessions of literacy assessment and overall evaluation from mentors and mentees as well as interviews with these research participants and teachers. A follow-up study would be needed to assess the effect of these

changes. Consequently, there might be unforeseen changes upon these participants' self-esteem, interpersonal relationships and academic outcomes in the subsequent school year.

Suggestions for schools, teachers, parents and community: social-ecological perspective

As mentioned earlier, young adolescence is a stressful period. These youngsters have to face major and dramatic changes in biologically, psychologically and socially. Researchers often neglect the importance of social dynamics and context. According to the social-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), 'an individual reacts to and acts on the environment nearest them which sets into play a series of interactions between social environments' (Rosenthal & Wilson, 2006). This could fit the local context of the educational setting. The most effective approach to enable these youngsters in developing their inner self is a combination of the efforts at all inter-related levels; individual, relationship, community, and societal (Wilson, 1987). In the present study, some suggestions are made as follows for improving communication and performance among the participants, parents, teachers and community and implementing the educational programme for the young people.

First, the individual level implies that the participant him- or herself plays a significant role in learning, interacting with others, and experiencing inner feelings. This level focuses on one's individual psychological and cognitive factors such as knowledge, attitudes and personality traits. Consistent with the findings, Dillon and Swinboune (2007) described how peer-helping networks in schools could improve the "availability, accessibility and appropriateness of social and personal

support" for young people (p. 6). As mentioned by one of the teachers in the interview, the peer support programme provides a channel for the students to air their frustrations as well as enabling them to gain sense of belonging with their peers and trainers.

A new secondary school student may experience difficulties in adjusting to the school system and environment. Meanwhile, dramatic physical, social and psychological changes have placed great pressure upon these young adolescents during this critical transition period. All these could affect their ability to learn effectively and gain better grades, and hence they might experience poor self-esteem. Therefore, having a peer support programme where participants have similar experiences should encourage them to gain mutual warmth, acceptance and support towards one another. After-school activities and a curriculum that places emphasis on participants' strengths could enable these young adolescents to develop positive inner resilience in facing all kinds of difficulties.

Setting up training programmes that include adventure-based and scenario role-playing activities, depending on the characteristics of the participants, is recommended. The aims of all these programmes are to allow participants to gain social skills, and experience of leadership, problem solving and reflection. Meanwhile, gaining a sense of empowerment is essential for the target participants because it could foster in them assertiveness and self-efficacy. Once these are gained, their academic performance, psychological wellbeing and relations with others should be enhanced. Hence, interactive group discussion and peer programmes which can foster self-support,

inner strength and self-acceptance in LA participants should be promoted.

Second, the interpersonal level describes the importance of significant others. The influence of significant others, such as peers, family, and friends 'provide social identity, support, role delineation, and interaction' for an individual (Gregson, Foerster & Orr, 2001: 13). In the midst of a difficult period, immediate support and guidance from significant others plays a significant role in helping these youngsters to go through the difficult transition period. A good schooling experience could meet young adolescents' developmental needs for belonging, respect, mastery, autonomy and meaning in their lives (Cartwright, 2007).

The educators should be sensitive to the individual needs of young adolescent learners. In Hong Kong, the education system places great emphasis on the three Rs – Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic – in order to evaluate whether they are good students. Meier (1995 as cited in Benard, 2001) highlighted the additional set of three Rs; Relationship, Respect, and Responsibility. Thus, a combination of the traditional and additional set of 3Rs could enable adolescents to perform and feel better about themselves as well as others. Likewise, school characteristics could stress the importance of integrative values and thinking about learning, such as partnership, holistic and lifelong learning. Instead of emphasizing students' weaknesses, teachers and parents are encouraged to acknowledge and give credit for the efforts that the students have made.

The data collected in the present study has indicated that there was a discrepancy between the students' perceptions and the teachers' perceptions. The research participants described how

their teachers 'don't understand them and just [place] emphasis on the students' academic success, but not their personal needs'. This implies that it is important for the teacher and student to establish a trust relationship, since teachers play the role of 'secondary' parents in students' personal growth development. Educating secondary school teachers in fostering high-quality relationships with students is needed. The teachers should abandon the traditional perspective of one-way teaching and downplay the value of high grades in evaluating the best and worst students. Rather, they should establish positive interpersonal relationships with their students. In the interim, the teachers could also spend time talking with the students' about non-academic areas through on-line exchange, which facilitates the quality of teacher and student communication. Hence, having a trusting student-teacher relationship enables the students to develop a sense of belonging, positive perception towards self and others, and better academic outcomes.

Meanwhile, having effective teacher-parent partnership could help the students to perform better at school (Dhigra, Manha & Sthi, 2007). During the interviews, the teachers also highlighted that 'parent-school partnership does have a great impact on students' learning and psychological outcomes'. Some programmes, like workshops and group sharing for teachers and parents, would facilitate them having better communication with their students.

At the same time, the role of mentors has a great impact on the LA students, both for academic and non-academic outcomes. Data from the participant observation, it was noted that the first-form students seemed reluctant to listen to their mentors and acted rebelliously against them.

Bond and Castagnera (2003) proposed an effective model for a peer tutor course. In this model, peer tutors need to be matched with other students based on grade level in the beginning (Johnson, 2008). The mentors then need to check with the teacher to receive instruction on how to meet the student's needs for the day's activities. They are also given a daily journal in which they record activities and monitor the progress of that student. Each session, before class is over, the tutor could return the journal to the teacher and share the progress of student. This training should increase the mentors' skills and self-efficacy in coping with the participants' learning and emotional wellbeing.

Finally, the level of the community outside school, and volunteering, allows teenagers to gain an opportunity to experience situations beyond the classroom and the home (Kuperminc, Holditch & Allen, 2001). The school could cooperate with volunteering programmes in order to make use of peer influence to inspire the spirit of togetherness and mutual care among youngsters (Kuperminc, Holditch & Allen, 2001). At the same time, both teachers and parents could encourage their children to join in community service. Therefore, having strong social networking among schools, such as inter-school competitions and group sharing, could provide a healthy environment for the adolescents.

All in all, good communication between trainer, teacher, and parents working as a team could establish a positive learning community for students and foster their studies and psychological wellbeing.

These findings provide important insights about the associations between quality of teacher-student relationships and students' academic and psychosocial outcomes. Further studies are needed. It is important to gain deeper insight of the dynamics and interactions among them, particularly to conduct age and cross-cultural comparisons on the interaction between the students and the teachers, the mentors and the participants, highlighting their perceptions of their interpersonal relationships.

Three major findings arise from this investigation. First, the overall effectiveness of the peer support programme could enhance the students' academic performance and peer affiliations, this was agreed by the participants, teachers, trainer and researcher. It implied that the peer support programme fostered peer interaction and affiliations by providing every participant with the availability and accessibility of appropriate social and personal support. All the participants reported that they currently have a group of stable and positive friends. As reported by the teachers, the programme has provided the students with a positive quality of friendship, which will enhance the participants' perceptions of themselves as they become more motivated to do better in their learning. Second, the school plays an important role in young adolescents' lives. Relationships between teachers and students could improve if there is more peer interaction. Once the bonding is well established between the mentor and the younger student, the quality of the relationship between the teacher and student could be also improved. Positive teacher-student relationships could decrease the discrepancy between the teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions. Third,

a warm and supportive network has been established among the participants. Although some complained about their mentors for not engaging very well, the in-group bonding among the young students was very strong, so as to equip them with better social skills and positive interpersonal relationships with other classmates.

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List of Tables

Table 1   *Background Information on the Participants*