

Chinese Academic Achievement Motivation: Pre-examination Motivation and Achievement in Core Academic Subjects

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In the present study, we investigated the relationship between goal orientations, self-regulating motivation, self-esteem, goal investment, contingent self-worth, and the effects on senior secondary school students' Chinese, English and Mathematics examination performance. After considering students' term marks and gender, repeated regression analyses suggested that in order for students to perform at their best in the examination context, self-esteem was a positive predictor for all academic subjects. External regulation was found to be a positive predictor for both Chinese and English. For English, higher performance goal, contingent self-worth, and lower identified regulation were shown to be beneficial to students' English examination achievement. For Mathematics, regression analysis showed a negative relation between intrinsic motivation and Mathematics examination achievement.

The positive relationship between self-esteem and examination achievement found in the present study provides support for Li (2004)'s suggestion about Chinese children's stronger sense of independence in the area of learning. Incongruent to previous findings (Bernardo, 2008), mastery goals did not relate to all examination performance. It could be attributed to the highly stressful and demanding learning environment (Biggs, 1996) or the approaches of final examination, Rao et al. (2000) suggested that knowing examination techniques and acquiring relevant cognitive strategies are more relevant to the success in examination than the acquisition of self-regulated strategy. Therefore, fostering mastery goal orientations may not be relevant to the context of examination or at least two weeks before their final examination. Rather than negatively affecting students' achievement or adjustment as suggested by some researchers (Burton et al., 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2006), extrinsic motivation may contribute to their narrowed attention to meet the new demands from the upcoming final examination, it was shown that external regulation is beneficial to students' achievement.

Self-handicapping strategies may explain the failure of intrinsic motivation in being a desirable motivation force for Mathematics achievement. Low achieving students have been found to adopt self-handicapping strategies in order to preserve personal worth or self-esteem (Rao et al., 2000). Students may also opt for easier or personally satisfying Mathematics practices to preserve their enjoyment in learning Mathematics and to maintain their intrinsic value for this subject, which resulted in Mathematics underachievement.

In the present study, no attempt had been made to distinguish performance approach and avoidance goals. If distinction had been made to separate the two types of performance goals, a clearer picture might emerge for explaining Hong Kong students' achievement. Future studies are encouraged to examine the effects of different types of performance goals. In addition, future studies can examine different causal models that concern the effects of academic motivation on students' achievement by employing advanced statistical modeling techniques (e.g., multi-causal structural equation modeling).

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