Academic Self - Handicapping in Adolescents: Predictors and Implications

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Abstract:

The process of education helps in holistic development of learners by enabling them to develop needed adequacies, competencies, skills to deal successfully with real-life situations. With the aim of education being holistic development, the process includes interaction among environmental settings and psychological constructs to achieve desirable changes. Self-handicapping is one such construct which individuals employ to protect their self-esteem in spite of the failures they face. It is defined as an action or choice of performance setting that enhances opportunity to externalise failure and internalize success. Individuals engaging in self – handicapping create unfavourable circumstances or situations prior to their important performances to protect self-esteem in case of their failure, or enhance esteem in case of success This paper identifies concept of self-handicapping, individuals' self-handicapping tendencies, and context promoting its origin, determinants and strategies to cope with this behaviour aiding the healthy development of individuals.

Key words: *Academic Self-handicapping, Adolescents, Predictors, Implications*

I. INTRODUCTION

The process of education helps in the holistic development of learners. It enables them to develop needed adequacies, competencies, skills to deal successfully with real-life situations. Education focuses more on socially contrived phenomenon wherein the environmental settings, psychological constructs, interact with each other in appropriate ways so as to achieve desirable changes in the status of individuals.

In the present context of Education, though all-round development is given importance, the success in education through learner's academic achievement also carries an equal emphasis. Along with this, equipping learners with ability to cope positively with the demands of society is also an objective of providing education. With most of the learning that happens through classroom transaction, it is influenced by various factors that promote or hinder the effectiveness of learning in students. These factors have their roots in psychological and social constructs. It becomes the responsibility of teachers to understand the interaction effect of these factors on learning and adapt suitable teaching strategies for classroom transaction.

II. SELF-HANDICAPPING

The behaviour of self – handicapping has been considered as a self-protective strategy, used by all, especially adolescents in different situations assessed as threatening the positive self- esteem. Self-handicapping behaviour involves creating obstacles/impediments to performance to protect or enhance one's perceived competence(Berglas & Jones, 1978).This behaviour provides opportunity to protect the individual's fragile image, to externalize failure and internalize success.

Self- handicapping differs from simply making external attributions for failure. The difference lies in the fact that self-handicapping is a pro-active strategy employed before the task is performed.

Example:

Students who procrastinate to study till 3 am to prepare for exams before attending to their exams may perform badly on the paper and may attribute her/ his poor performance to procrastination, but it can be considered only as self-handicapping provided the procrastination be considered as a reason for poor performance.

Self-handicapping have been identified of two types – Behavioural and Self-reported.

- ✓ **Behavioural Self-handicapping:** They are the most obvious actions that reduce the likelihood of success . Although they are sometimes perceived more negative, they are most convincing and effective due to their observable nature.

   Examples: Consuming drugs and alcohol before a performance, reduced effort and practice and preferring to work in a distracting environment

- ✓ **Self-reported handicapping:** They are claims that a condition exists that are impending to performance that may or may not be true as they cannot be observed. They have a less costly effect to performance (Leary et al.,)

   Examples: Psychological and health problems, bad mood and a traumatic event.

III. CONTEXT PROMOTING SELF-HANDICAPPING IN STUDENTS

In this background of academic learning, students sometimes experience threats to their self- esteem due to various factors.

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Until adolescence, learners do not recognise the perceptions of others. The phenomenon of egocentric ideation that takes place in this stage makes adolescents feels that they are being observed by others around them. These situations have more potential in posing a threat to self- esteem of students. Under these circumstances, students employ themselves in self-handicapping to protect their self-esteem.

E.g. Some students procrastinate studying and working on assignments till last minute, spend their time on doing other things before the test, so that these situations can be seen as a cause for low performance rather than the lack of ability. Other strategies include procrastination, effort withdrawal, claiming test anxiety or illness etc.,

IV. PURPOSE OF SELF-HANDICAPPING

Self-handicapping is engaged mostly for two reasons (Arun Kumar, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996):

- Self-protection in regard to oneself and
- Self-protection in regard to the perception of others

Students engage in self-handicapping for the sake of impression management (Kolditz & Arkin, 1982). When individuals fear or expect failure at certain tasks that are significant to them, they engage in practices that increase the probability of failure, so they can have an excuse, other than lack of ability, for the failure.

V. ACADEMIC SELF- HANDICAPPING

Self- handicapping behaviour occurs in any situation that involves an ability-diagnostic activity. Schools and classroom provide excellent real world contexts for examining self-handicapping behaviour as in such settings, students are continually confronted with tasks and situations in which information about their ability and intelligence is on public display.

This behaviour of self-handicapping occurs in individuals in all domains, but demands a significant attention because academic achievement reflects on a value added characteristic – Intelligence. Students, especially during adolescent age worry about them appearing unintelligent if they poorly perform on a specific task assigned to them. In addition, students' performance on these tasks has consequences for relevant outcomes (their performance results, future education and job prospects). The presence of teachers and peers in the achievement situations allow for frequent opportunities to manipulate the perception of others, a primary goal of self-handicappers. Schools, thus provide ample opportunity for examining both the self-handicapping dispositions of individuals and the possible contextual influences on self-handicapping behaviour.

VI. PREDICTORS OF ACADEMIC SELF-HANDICAPPING

Self-handicapping is considered as a trait-like tendency (Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982) and as situation engendered behaviour (Tice, 1991). When this is considered as a trait, some individuals are simply more inclined to self-handicap than others, and this exists across situations. The sources for these can be biological or can evolve from experiences of socialization during childhood, such as a strong insistence on

the significance of appearing able. There are factors that predict the self-handicapping to occur in academic contexts.

Self- handicapping is associated with a various stable characteristics that may contribute to behaviours such as low self-esteem, low perceptions of control, high self-consciousness and a belief that intelligence is a fixed trait (Berglas, 1985; Rhodewalt,1994;Knee & Zuckerman,1998). Those who consider self-handicapping as a situation- specific behaviour focus on environmental factors as the sources of self-handicapping behaviour. Midgley & Urdan(2001), Urdan & Anderman(1998), Urdan(2004) examined the association between the emphasis on performance goals in classroom and self-handicapping behaviour.

Midgley & Urdan (1995) found that feeling self-conscious in school, low self-worth and being oriented to extrinsic and adult approval achievement goals, perceiving the school emphasized performance goals and associating with friends with a negative bearing toward academics predicted the use of self – handicapping strategies.

Students also use handicapping strategies where they perceive an emphasis on competition and trying to outperform peers. Situations in which participants are told they will be given a difficult task and the performance on task is indicative of ability where they fear that they may not succeed and that any lack of success may indicate a general lack of ability, self-handicapping is more likely to occur.

Individuals who have a history of low achievement develop the expectation of low achievement on similar tasks in future, especially if they believe the failure is caused by stable and uncontrollable causes, such as lack of ability. Once individuals develop the belief that they may fail on an upcoming task, they become more likely to engage in self-handicapping behaviour, which in turn increases the probability of failure. This cycle of failure – self-handicapping – failure results in the withdrawal of effort in school, leading to dropping out of the activity (Urdan & Midgley, 2003; Kieffer & Knee, 1998; Zuckerman).

Many researches investigating the association between motivation and self-handicapping revealed that certain motivational characteristics of students and teaching practices are related with self- handicapping behaviour. When learners are much concerned about not performing worse than other students, and with not appearing academically unable, they have more tendencies to self-handicap (Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan & Midgley, 2002; Urdan 2004).

There is considerable amount of research literature that agrees self-handicapping has negative effects on significant educational processes and outcomes such as motivation and achievement (Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 2001a; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman,1998; Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998). This is because the self-handicapping behaviour represents a reduction or withdrawal of effort towards a given task, and is not surprising that self-handicapping is associated with lower performance on these tasks.

Additionally, there are researches that indicate self-handicappers do feel better about themselves after failure than students who do not handicap (Drexler, Ahrens & Haaga, 1995; Feick & Rhodewalt, 1997). Hence, there is an

ego-protective function of self-handicapping in failure situations. Along with this, there are benefits for students who succeed despite self-handicapping (Feick & Rhodewalt,1997). Also research studies cite that students who succeed after engaging in self-handicapping behaviour experience temporary boost in their self- esteem. Students with low self-esteem were more likely to self-handicap when they fear failing at a task, whereas students with high self-esteem handicap when they find there is a chance to standout as exceptionally able by succeeding at a task (Tice, 1991). In total, self- handicapping helps individuals deflect judgements of others away from low- ability attributions for failure.

Even though self-handicappers are often successful at their attempt to provide excuses other than low ability for their low achievements, they usually do not delude themselves. They are very much aware and describe themselves with words as "lazy" and "shiftless" (Covington, 1992). These behaviours of self-handicappers make observers develop negative attitude about personalities and work-habits of self-handicappers (Rhodewalt et al.,1995; Smith & Strube, 1991).

VII. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS TO HANDLE ACADEMIC SELF-HANDICAPPING

The findings from the field studies on the relation between self- handicapping and academic achievement have reflected considerable heterogeneity, ranging from non-significant (Rhodewalt & Hill, 1995), to moderately negative (Boon, 2007; Schwinger & Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2012), to large negative correlations (Midgley & Urdan, 1995, 2001). This variability in the results have made it difficult to draw general conclusions regarding mean effect of self-handicapping on achievement and this has made it challenging to suggest implications for lessening the self-handicapping behaviour in students. To reduce self-handicapping in students, teachers can deemphasize social comparison and competition in classroom among students and focus on individual growth, improvement and comprehension of the academic matter(Anderman & Anderman, 1999), avoid public display of student achievement and explicitly support student autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Turner, Meyer, Midgley & Patrick, 2003). Students should be made aware of Intelligence as a modifiable characteristic, that can be improved through effort and students are to be praised for the strategies they employ to complete a task instead of praising them as smart, as the latter may encourage to think them of ability as fixed, a view that contributes to self-handicapping(Dweck,1999). Teachers also can focus on providing the contingent responses for students' efforts as this enables students to be confident about their abilities. If students are unsure of the reasons for achieving success, this could lead to instances of self-handicapping as they are not proficient in skills to replicate the performance, instead they have set a standard which they are not aware to recreate. Teachers and parents can reinforce or secure individuals' self-esteem through self-affirmation and this will hold good in situations only when the affirmation focuses on a domain other than the one that is being threatened (Finez & Sherman,2012).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Since the self – handicapping behaviour thwarts achievement and leads to long-term withdrawal from academic achievement activities, it becomes crucial for teachers and parents to discourage behaviours that promote self-handicapping and avoid behaviours that encourage it. It implies that there is an adequate need to develop educational interventions that focus explicitly on reducing self-handicapping among students. Students can be encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning and engaged in a dialogue that sets the stage for adaptations and fruitful growth.

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