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SELF-ESTEEM DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE COLLEGE BOUND TRACK
AND THE VOCATIONAL TRACK DURING HIGH SCHOOL


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Self-esteem Differences Between the College Bound Track and the Vocational
Track During High School

A Thesis
Presented for the
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Degree
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to
my parents, Bob and Donna Housley,
my sister, Maria Housley,
Arnold and Mary Jo Smith, R.C. and Melrose Housley,
and Brett, Shan and Brodie Miller

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that administrators and teachers value the vocational track and the college preparatory track at different levels. There are differences between the students in the vocational track and the college preparatory track. They differ in action orientation, goal setting, and problem solving. Given these differences this study examined whether being a part of one of these tracks had an effect on self-esteem. A self-esteem inventory was given to McMinn County High School students to see if the vocationally tracked student had lower self-esteem than a college preparatory tracked student. Results indicated that college bound track students had higher self-esteem than vocational track students with regard to Global Self-esteem, Peer Popularity, and Personal Security.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As adolescents enter high school they are faced with many decisions. One decision that all students make is whether to take the college preparatory track or the vocational track. This is a very important decision that can impact their lives in many ways. Often high school students do not have the maturity level to make the important decision of choosing either a vocational or college bound track for their high school career (Noddings, 1996).

These tracks are designed to prepare the students for their future. They are choosing between beginning a full-time job immediately following high school graduation, usually at a technical or trade job or entering college and pursuing a degree, which will prepare them for a career. Students make a choice during their eighth grade year as to what track they want to take when they enter high school. They have the option of choosing either the college bound track or the vocational track. The college bound track allows them to complete all the course work necessary to meet entrance requirements for college. These include four years of English, Physical Science, Biology, Chemistry, Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II, World Geography, World History, Economics, American Government, American History, two years of the same foreign language, and a visual or performing arts credit. Students are encouraged to take keyboarding and an advanced math and science course to fill their elective slots. The vocational track is to prepare students for a job right out of high school. They must take four years of English, Physical Science, Agriculture Science, and Life Science, Math

Tech I, Math Tech II, Foundations, World Geography, Economics, American Government, American History, and four classes having to do with the same vocation. Students on the vocational track have the option of taking higher math and science classes instead of those mentioned but they are not required for graduation. For their elective classes they are encouraged to take more vocational classes (Parks & Swanson, 2000).

Although advocates for the college bound track argue that all students should enroll in these classes to have a chance at college and it is ultimately the best education for everyone (Noddings, 1996), research suggests that there are differences between students who choose vocational or college bound tracks. Knisley (1993) surveyed Vermont high school students in an attempt to find factors that influenced their decision to pursue the college track. From background and demographic information of surveyed students, he gathered that the typical respondent was functioning at an average or above average level of intelligence. This means that the typical respondent is capable of attaining college entrance status. The students planning to attend college shared a consensus on several survey questions. Most felt that their friends, family, and community were supportive in their decision to further their education. They also felt high school course work had not been challenging and they were looking forward to meeting new challenges college could offer. Participation in sports and clubs were important to them as well as attending academic classes. These common answers throughout the students in the college preparatory track exhibit qualities of a person with a high level of self-esteem.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there are many similarities between the vocational and regular education courses research indicates there are differences in the expectations of how classes should be conducted. Vocational education can be complex because it incorporates classroom instruction, laboratory work, participation in student organizations, and on-the-job training all in one course. Teachers must continuously update their classes to keep up with the outside vocational world (Pearce & Jones, 1992). When teachers of vocational/home economics and regular education teachers were surveyed some differences were found. They reported that the physical setting in which the class is taught differed. Vocational/home economic teachers reported that they would rather teach in a workshop atmosphere as opposed to regular education teachers who preferred to teach in the traditional classroom setting (Evers & Bursuck, 1993).

There were also some differences in classroom management. Vocational/home economics teachers gave more independent assignments to the students than did regular education teachers. Vocational/home economic teachers usually require that assignments be worked on during the class period. However, regular education teachers were not as likely to have this requirement. This suggests that vocational teachers prioritize class requirements differently from regular education teachers. Vocational/home economic teachers focused more on projects and regular education teachers focused more on tests and attendance (Evers & Bursuck, 1993).

To meet all the requirements of the college bound track within the four years of high school there is limited if any space for vocational classes. In order to counter this limitation, Pearce and Jones (1992) suggest that classes in high school be more structured to incorporate both college preparation with vocational education.

These differences may seem insignificant, but these differences are often used to make the assumption that the vocational track is inferior. Some administrators and teachers do hold this belief (Evers & Bursuck, 1993). A study by Oakes, Selvin, Karoly, and Guiten (as cited in RAND, 1992) tells of the belief that vocational education is being held in low regard by the administration and the teachers who make up the American high school system. As teachers and administrators academically group students for classes, the vocational track is used as a funnel for the low functioning and behavior prone students. The vocational track is held in such low regard by the students that it has little effect in the decision making process of what classes students should enroll. A student's action orientation which encompasses an individual's values, decision-making ability, and long and short term control beliefs, may have more to do with what classes they choose rather than the appeal or mere lack of appeal of the vocational track (Klaczynski & Reese, 1991).

A study by Klaczynski and Reese (1991) examined the type of action orientation of college preparatory and vocationally tracked students. By administering a questionnaire that tested the areas of values, control beliefs, future orientation, and decision-making ability they were able to group students

into the action orientation of career preparation or adult preparation. The author describes adult preparation as valuing the sense of responsibility, setting goals that meet adult status, and linking educational successes to outside factors and educational failures to internal factors describes adult preparation. Career preparation refers to setting goals and making decisions with the idea of career and educational success in mind. The college preparatory students were found to show career preparation orientation and vocational students are shown to have an adult preparation orientation.

Not only do the differently tracked students have different action orientation, they also have different goals and problem solving skills. Klaczynski, Laipple, and Jurden (1992) explained goals and practical problem solving skills in the vocationally tracked and college preparatory tracked students. Vocationally tracked students have different goals from college preparatory tracked students. Research reported that vocationally tracked students exhibited more adult anticipation goals and college preparatory students exhibited more career anticipation goals. Adult anticipation is described as a desire to achieve adult things such as marriage, family, and home ownership. Career anticipation goals are described as a desire to be successful in school and future careers. Although there were differences between interpretation styles they did not reach statistical significance. More college preparatory students interpreted problems on a goal-focused level, which means they focused on personal evaluations of goals dealing with the problem. Vocationally tracked students interpreted more problems on a social level. They focused on how others around them were going to be affected by the problem.

Wulff and Steitz (1997) looked at factors that influence females to make

the decision between the college preparatory and the vocational track. They felt that choosing a track for females could be linked to masculine and feminine domains. They hypothesized that females who chose the vocational track would exhibit more feminine personality traits and females choosing the college preparatory track would exhibit more masculine personality traits. After examining the results of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory there was no evidence to suggest this was correct. There was no significant difference between the femininity and masculinity scores of the two groups. In discussion, it was speculated that the self-esteem of the females in masculine and feminine roles might play a part in the decision making process.

Saurino (1994) looks at the evaluation formats of the college preparatory track and the vocational track. His operational definitions of these two tracks show a distinct difference between them. College preparatory track is defined as those students who are planning or might be planning to attend college or post-secondary education. Vocational track is defined as those students having no desire to attend college, especially those in vocational courses and those whose advisors feel they will not be able to handle college bound difficulty. This study was designed to develop an added essay evaluation format from which he believed both tracks would benefit. He did not generate the results that had been hypothesized. The college preparatory track showed great benefits from the added essay questions. Ten percent moved from a failing grade to a passing grade. The vocational track did not benefit from the essay format. Students' grades dropped and several students went from passing to failing. In

comparison, the researcher received very different responses from student discussion on the essay format. Students in the college preparatory track commented that they liked being able to write all they knew on a subject because once they started writing they were able to remember more information to include. Students in the vocational track felt they could not explain themselves in writing and said they would not attempt questions because they knew they would not be able to complete the full question. Saurino's own observations of the two groups were quite different as well. Through interviews, observations and group discussions he concluded that the students in the college preparatory track showed a more positive attitude even after receiving a poor grade on an individual test and reported them interested in extra credit and doing well in all academics. For the students in the vocational track he concluded a more negative attitude was present. This researcher saw a lack of motivation and interest and the inability to bounce back after receiving a poor grade.

Adolescence is considered to be a great transitional period for such changes as physical appearance, social welfare, and cognitive development. Many environmental and developmental changes are taking place because of the adolescent vulnerability. This vulnerability may lead to the adolescent's indications of needing special school recognition and popularity at school. They often worry about such things as terrorism, dating, sex, parental health, special recognition at school, and feeling that they are bad people. These worries begin to form in adolescence because the children's egocentrism gives way to the greater understanding of themselves in relation to the world (Kaufman, Brown,

Graves, Henderson, & Revolinski, 1993). According to Mullis, Mullis, and Mormandin (1992) a most crucial period for adolescents is the transition from junior high to high school. Students are moved from a stable environment to one that encompasses new friends, new and numerous teachers, and new social standards. This often results in a shift in self-image, often to the negative side.

There are other factors besides academia life that play a role in adolescent self-esteem. Parental support is a large factor in how adolescents feel about themselves. Filozof, Albertin, Jones, and Steme (1998) suggests that self-esteem can be enhanced considerably if parents are involved in the enhancement process. Researchers Eskilson, Wiley, Muehlbauer, and Dodder (1986) felt that there was a link between self-esteem and parental support. They hypothesized that children with either too much or too little parental pressure to meet family standards and goals would exhibit low levels of self-esteem and turn to deviant behavior. Results showed that those children with perceived parental pressure as too much or too little had significantly lower self-esteem than those children who perceived parental pressure at a moderate level. Children who felt they were able to meet their own family's standards and goals had a higher level of self-esteem than those who felt they were not able to meet them. The only link to deviant behavior in regards to parental pressure and self-esteem was vandalism. Those children with high parental pressure and low self-esteem reported being involved in acts of vandalism.

Isberg et al. (1989) studied self-esteem of high school students using The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. They rated interactions between parents

during interviews and found a link between parental approval and self-esteem. Students used perceived parental approval to rate their self-worth. Students who had the most trouble conforming to parental standards were the group who reported having the highest correlations between self-esteem and parental approval. Researchers contributed this to students having a difficult time trying to meet parental approval and transitioning into adulthood. The only way they knew how to cope was to totally reject family ideals.

Another study involving self-esteem of adolescents was conducted by Barber, Chadwick, and Oerter (1992). These researchers believed that behaviors of parents were directly related to self-esteem. They believed that positive support from parents would result in an elevated level of self-esteem and negative behaviors would lead to a low level of self-esteem for the child. Researchers used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory, Social Worth Scale and self-report from parents and children on parental behavior to test their hypothesis. They found that a child's self-esteem was associated with a parental association. A perceived positive relationship between parent and child resulted in high levels of self-esteem and self-worth.

One study was interested in the relationship between parental nurturing and self-esteem development. Buri (1986) believed that positive parenting interactions would correlate with a positive self-esteem. He collected data using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory and self-report measures for parenting styles. His findings supported his theory that parental approval and support were necessary for development of a positive self-esteem. The authoritative parenting

style with its clear and firm direction and discussion of reasoning prove to give the child an element of acceptance and respect. This helps positive self-esteem development for the child. The authoritarian parenting style puts an emphasis on obedience at all times and harsh punishments when it is not followed. This leaves the child wondering about support and acceptance from their parents and does not stimulate positive self-esteem development. Although all children were dependent on parents for development for self-esteem, it appeared in the results that females were more dependant of parental approval for self-esteem than were the males.

Factors that contribute to self-esteem do not always effects males in the same way they effect females. According to Lackovic-Grgin and Dekovic (1990) males are greatly influenced by the opinions of the opposite sex than did females. On the other hand, females are more reliant than males on being good students to have self-worth. It seems however that both genders rely heavily on others opinions to evaluate self-worth.

Using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) Thorne and Michaelieu (1986) found that males with high self-esteem were more focused on getting ahead of others and being more successful. Females who showed a high level of self-esteem were more focused on making a connection with other people and lending them a helping hand. The commonality for males with low levels of self-esteem lies with the opposite sex. They reported having struggles in relationships with the opposite sex on numerous occasion both in an intimate and a friend relationship.

Cienki and Brooks (1989) were interested in self-esteem differences of college preparatory high school students and vocational high school students. They used Rosenberg's self-esteem scale and tested freshman and senior male and female students, from the two high schools. The researchers found that there were gender differences between freshman and seniors in the two different schools. In the college preparatory school self-esteem was higher for freshman males than senior males and self-esteem for freshman and senior females were the same. In the vocational school self-esteem was higher for senior males than freshman males and self-esteem was higher for freshman females than senior females.

No studies were found that looked specifically at the self-esteem differences between the college preparatory track and the vocational track when they occur within the same school. If administrators and teachers hold the vocational track in low regard students might also have this same opinion and feel more negatively or positively about themselves according to what track they choose. This study will examine whether there is a difference between college preparatory tracked students and vocationally tracked students in regard to self-esteem. It is hypothesized that college preparatory tracked students will have a higher measure of self-esteem than vocationally tracked students.

METHODS

Participants

One hundred freshman, sophomore, and junior high school students from McMinn County High School, in eastern Tennessee, volunteered to participate in this study. Out of these one hundred students, thirteen were enrolled in the vocational track while eighty-seven were in the college bound track.

Measures

The Self-Esteem Index (SEI) was administered to assess the participant's self-esteem. The SEI was developed by Brown and Alexander in 1991 to measure the personality construct of self-esteem in children or adolescents, ages 7-18. It is composed of 80 questions, which measure individual perceptions in the areas of Familial Acceptance, Academic Competence, Peer Popularity, and Personal Security. The Familial Acceptance subscale measures the adolescent's perception of his or her role and value within the family unit. Academic Competence measures perceptions of the adolescent's intellectual and academic pursuits. Perceptions measured by Peer Popularity are the adolescent's acceptance and popularity with those individuals outside the family unit. The Personal Security scale measures perceptions about physical as well as psychological well being. These four subscales may be compiled to generate a composite score, the Self-Esteem Quotient, which is a global self-esteem assessment.

The test is designed to be given to groups or individuals and can be completed in thirty minutes or less. Each of the 80 questions is answered on a

Likert scale of always true, usually true, usually false, and always false. The SEI was normed on 2,455 adolescents ages 8-18 from all parts of the United States. Reliability of the SEI is good with an internal consistency alpha coefficient ranging from .80 to .90 for each age range. Concurrent validity with Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (1984) and Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (1984) range from .29 to .77 (Brown & Alexander, 1991).

Procedure

Permission was obtained from the McMinn County High School administration to visit the homerooms to recruit participants for the study. Students were informed that they had the opportunity to participate in a study that would ask them questions concerning their feelings about high school. They were also told that to volunteer for the study their parents must have signed a consent form and it was to be presented to the investigator before they could participate in the survey. The next week the homerooms were revisited. All participants who had parental consent and wanted to participate were given an assent form to sign and the Self-Esteem Index to complete. The participants were also asked to indicate on their scale whether they were on the college preparatory track or the vocational track. They were informed that if at any time they wished to discontinue the study for any reason they could choose to do so without any ramifications.

RESULTS

Means for Global Self-esteem and each subscale, Familial Acceptance, Academic Competence, Peer Popularity, and Personal Security, were calculated. (See Figures 1-5) Using Microsoft Excel an independent sample t-test for unequal variances was run and a significant difference was found between the college bound track ($M = 246.9195$, $SD = 28.5267$) and the vocational track ($M = 228.6154$, $SD = 17.25562$) in global self-esteem, $t(23) = 3.22278$, $p = .003732$. College bound track students were also found to differ significantly from vocational bound track students in the area of Peer Popularity, $t(24) = 3.332547$, $p = .002749$, and Personal Security, $t(15) = 2.820558$, $p = .012905$. The mean of global self-esteem of college bound track students fall at 61 percentile ranking while vocational track students falls at a percentile ranking of 32. Peer popularity for college bound students falls at 75 percentile ranking while vocational students fall at 50-percentile ranking. Personal Security for college bound students fall at 63 and vocational students at 25.

Table I. A Comparison of College Bound Track and Vocational Track Students

| | Vocational Track | College Bound Track | Vocational vs. College Bound |
|---------------------|---|---|--|
| Global Self-Esteem | <u>M</u> = 228.6154 <u>SD</u> = 17.25562 | <u>M</u> = 246.9195 <u>SD</u> = 28.5267 | <u>t</u> (23)= 3.22278 <u>p</u> = .003732* |
| Familial Acceptance | <u>M</u> =58.76923 <u>SD</u> = 7.928365 | <u>M</u> =62.34483 <u>SD</u> = 10.42563 | <u>t</u> (19)= 1.449541 <u>p</u> = .163493 |
| Academic Competence | <u>M</u> =54.92308 <u>SD</u> = 4.554513 | <u>M</u> =57.64368 <u>SD</u> = 9.74796 | <u>t</u> (32)= 1.659435 <u>p</u> = .106799 |
| Peer Popularity | <u>M</u> =59.07692 <u>SD</u> = 4.310095 | <u>M</u> = 63.86207 <u>SD</u> = 7.419604 | <u>t</u> (24)= 3.332547 <u>p</u> = .002749* |
| Personal Security | <u>M</u> =55.84615 <u>SD</u> = 8.725883 | <u>M</u> =63.06897 <u>SD</u> = 7.806963 | <u>t</u> (15)= 2.820558 <u>p</u> = .012905* |

Notes: An independent sample t-test for unequal variances is represented,
M=mean, SD=standard deviation

* indicates statistical significance

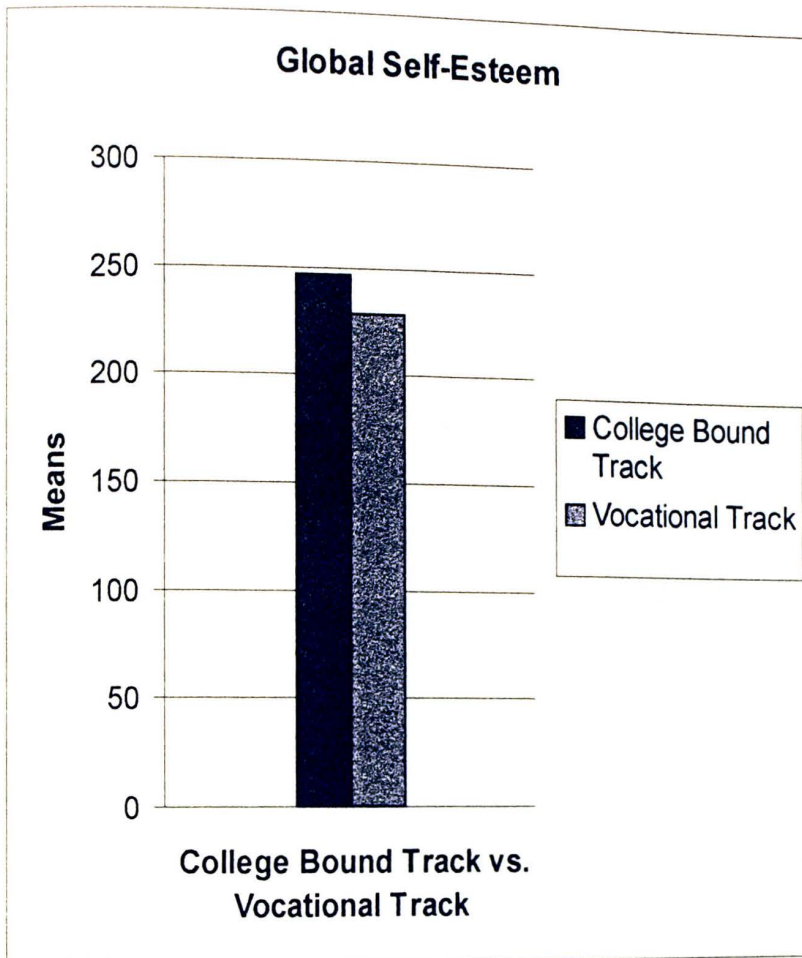


Figure 1. Means for Global Self-Esteem for College Bound Track students vs. Vocational Track students

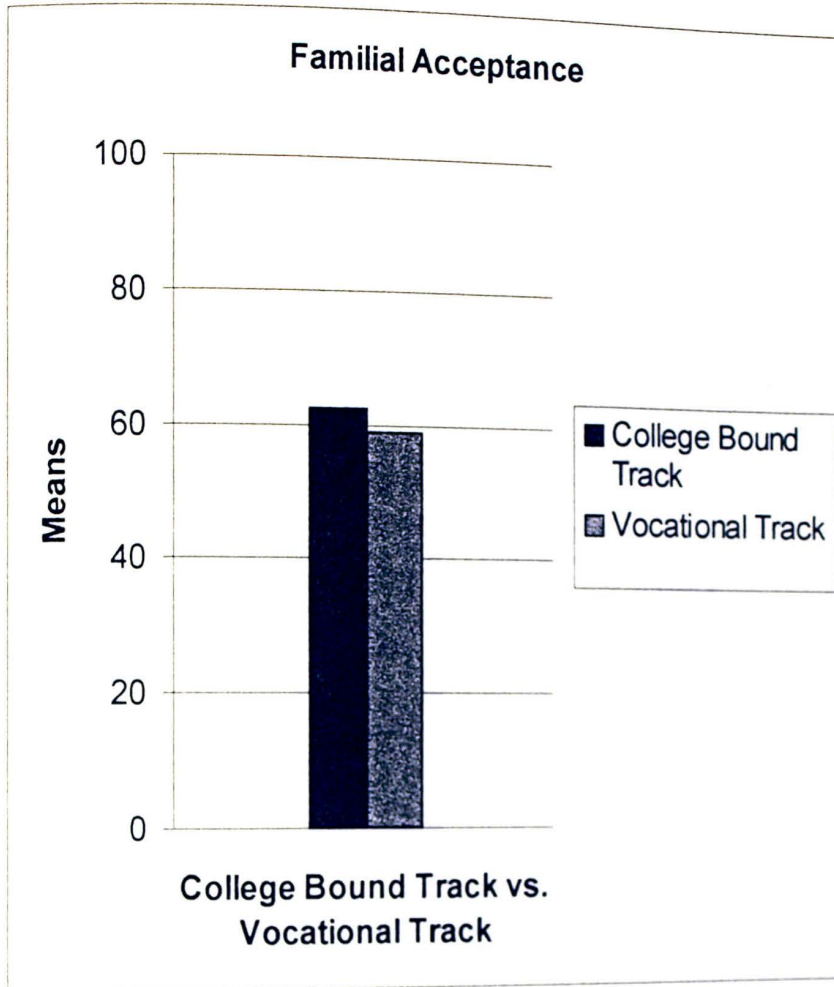


Figure 2. Means for Familial Acceptance for College Bound Track students vs. Vocational Track students

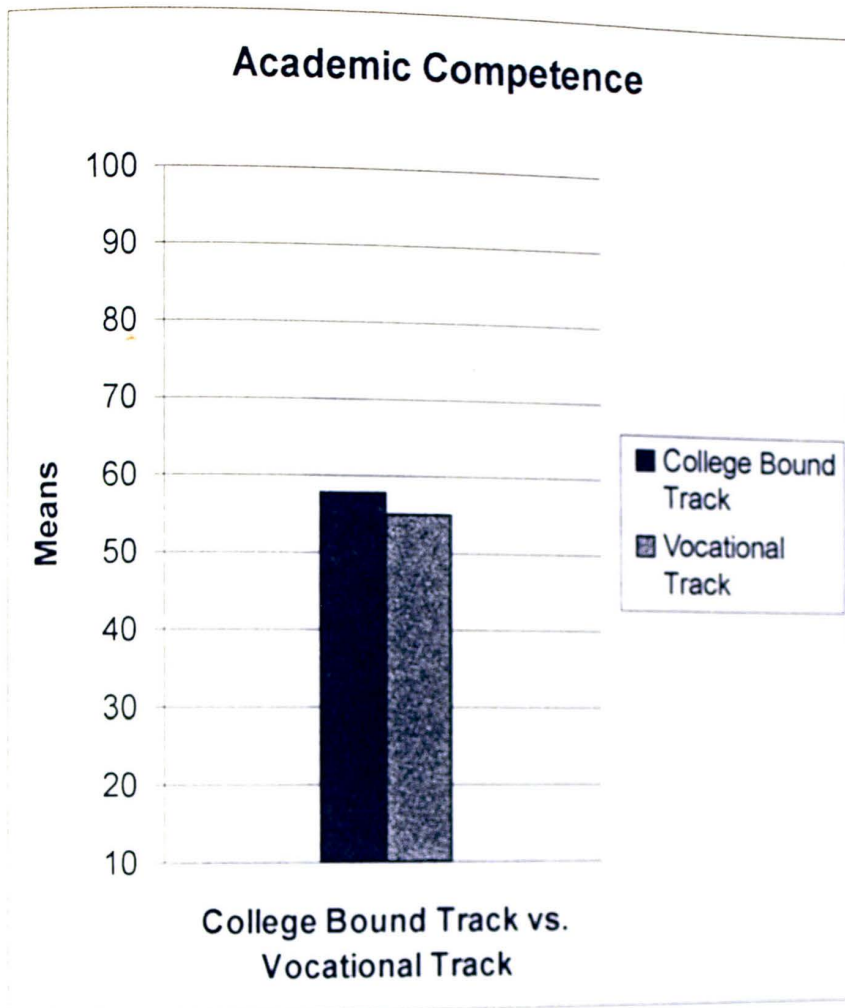


Figure 3. Means for Academic Competence for College Bound Track students vs. Vocational Track students

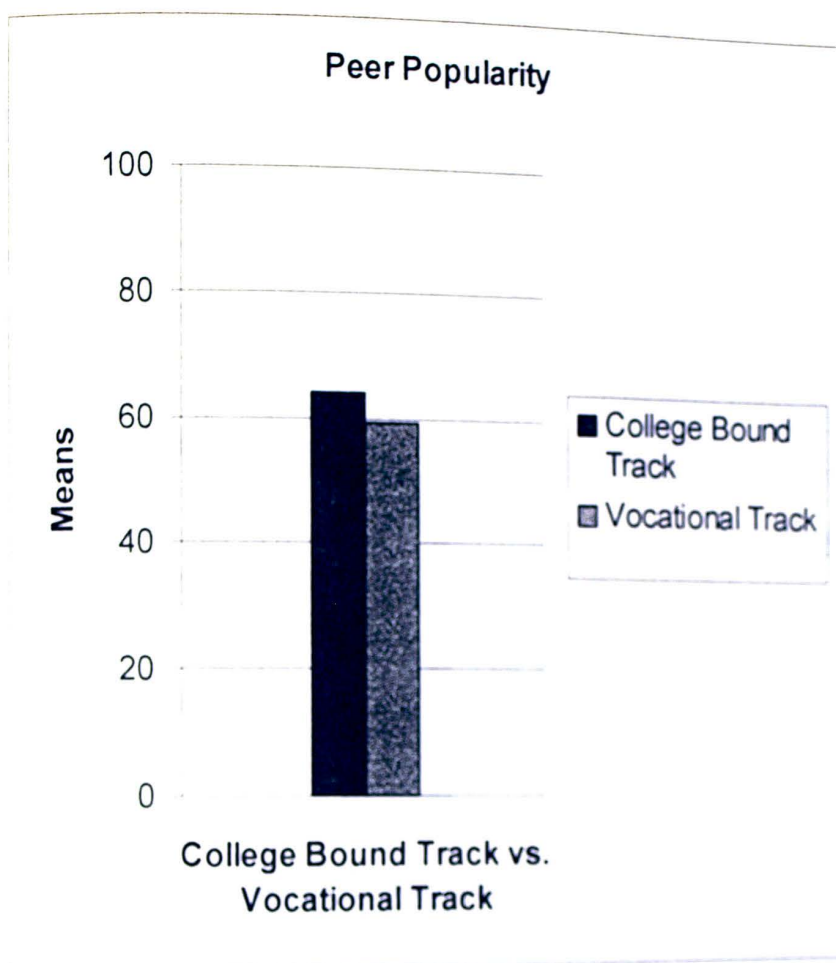


Figure 4. Means for Peer Popularity for College Bound Track students vs. Vocational Track students

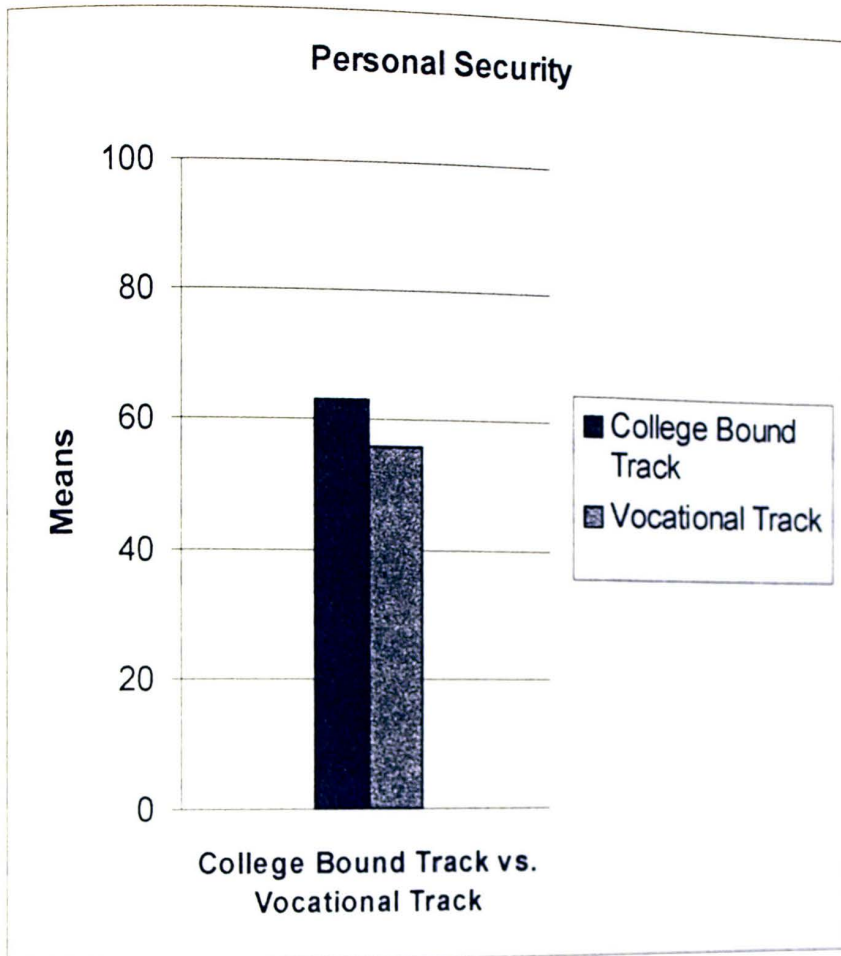


Figure 5. Means for Personal Security for College Bound Track students vs. Vocational Track students

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to examine the difference between college preparatory tracked students and vocationally tracked students in regard to self-esteem. It was hypothesized that college preparatory tracked students will have a higher measure of self-esteem than vocationally tracked students. As the results indicated there was a significant difference between college bound track students and vocational track students in the areas of Global Self-Esteem, Peer Popularity, and Personal Security. These differences supported the hypothesis that students on the college preparatory track, in this study, have a higher measure of self-esteem than the vocationally tracked students who participated in this study.

Global Self-Esteem refers to the way individuals perceive and value themselves as a whole. The significance in Global self-esteem indicates a more enhanced overall self-image in the college bound track students versus the vocational track students. The subscales of Peer Popularity and Personal Security function as a means to measure a more specialized purpose. The Peer Popularity subscale measures only how individuals perceive and value themselves in the context of their relationships with their peers. The reported significant difference may be interpreted as college bound track students having a higher self-image of themselves as social beings and leaders within their peer group than vocational track students. Personal Security measures how individuals perceive and value themselves in the area of physical and psychological well-being. The lower score on this subscale suggests that the

vocational track students in this study have a belief that they are in poor health and may often exhibit signs of anxiety. The high score in college bound track students correlates with a larger comfort level and a feeling of safety

The significant difference between the vocational track and the college bound track on these subscales suggests at least three possibilities. First, those individuals with lower self-esteem may be attracted to a vocational track that places more focus on manipulative skills. Students who chose the college bound track have a more elevated self-esteem and are attracted to a course that tests a larger array of skills. Second, the self-esteem of individuals who decide to follow the vocational track may be negatively affected during the course of their high school years. On the contrary, college bound tracks may impact one's self-esteem on a more positive note. Last, there may be a hidden factor that created the deviations in self-esteem between the two tracks.

The fact that there were no significant differences in the subscales of Familial Acceptance and Academic Competence show some interesting implications. For Familial Acceptance both groups had an average percentile ranking of 50. This indicates that students feel accepted and like being a part of their families a majority of the time. This supports the research that suggests parental support plays a large role in adolescent self-esteem (Eskilson et al., 1986; Isberg et al., 1989; Barber, Chadwick, & Oerter, 1992; Buri, 1986). This might also rule out the idea that lack of parental support would influence students choosing one track over another.

Scores for Academic Competence ranked in the lower percentile ranges, 37th for the college bound track and 25th for vocational track. This suggests that

the students do not consider themselves to be high learners and achievers. This would also suggest that students do not choose tracks because of their academic ability and the perceived difficulty of the tracks.

The opinions of the administrators and teachers may affect those of the students within each track. It is important for teachers and administrators to be aware of the biases they may hold for the different tracks so that their opinions do not negatively affect the self-image of students. A self-esteem course focusing primarily on transitions, friendships, and self-worth, implemented by school guidance programs into the vocational bound track curriculum could be helpful in the deficit in self-esteem of these students.

There are limitations to this study. Due to the nature of the study it is impossible to establish a cause and effect relationship. It cannot be determined whether the track truly effected self-esteem or whether individuals with low-self esteem were attracted to the vocational track. A longitudinal study following eighth graders through graduation would be more beneficial in establishing causality. Another limitation was the large variance between the two groups. A more equivalent number of participants, as opposed to the thirteen vocational track and eighty-seven college bound track students used in this study, would provide the research with better information.

This study examined self-esteem of college bound track and vocational track students during their high school years. It is important for more research to be conducted in this area to further assist in developing a well-rounded school. For school counselors this area of research could be vital in developing guidance

programs and counseling techniques to help students. If counselors are aware of the individual needs of college bound track and vocational track students they can implement specific programs to enhance certain areas of self-esteem. This will ensure an equal opportunity for all students to learn and achieve.

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