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## Character Assessment of Gifted and Talented Learners: An Initial Study

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### ABSTRACT

This initial study is conducted with purpose to assess the character of Malaysian gifted and talented learners. The main objective of the study is to gather baseline data that could be used to develop self-profile of this population of learners, which could be utilized to predict their future success and holistic wellbeing. Specifically, the research examines the respondents' character in the cognitive, emotional, physical, leadership, spiritual, and citizenship domains. A total number of 194 students from Pusat PERMATApintar™ Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia – a 'living laboratory' school established in 2011 to spearhead the gifted and talented education paradigm of the nation – were purposively sampled as the research's respondents. A set of questionnaires consisted of 72 items (5-point Likert scale) was administered to the respondents in a duration of 60 minutes. Data was descriptively analysed using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 21.0. Overall findings show that the respondents possessed satisfactory character traits in all domains (overall mean value was 3.86, and independent mean value was ranging from 3.63 to 4.13). The findings of this research works provide useful information that could help Pusat PERMATApintar™ Negara and other stakeholders of Malaysian gifted and talented education, in developing effective character building programme as well as the support system (in terms of psychoeducational programmes and counselling services) to holistically mould the students' personality and wellbeing.

*Keywords:* Character assessment, case study, gifted and talented, Malaysian education

### Introduction

The strength in self-esteem would become the catalyst in generating a nation's quality generation. Youth personality of today would shape the future of the country. Malaysia require a generation of successors who possess excellent self-esteem to ensure the nation's development agenda would continue to grow. Self-esteem in general refers to unique and special quality in individuals in many aspects and it includes; overall values, ritual, language, culture, religion and many others. The special characteristics are authentic and it becomes the foundation in nurturing character, personality and functions as the identity of a person or a nation, in which the traits are reflected in the form of knowledge, behaviour, emotion, values and belief (Mohd Yusof Othman et al., 2012). Individual's self-esteem involves one's character, good. Authentic and honest behaviour, manifested through one's way of thinking, action and self-projection (Teo Kok Seong, 2013). These behaviours are demonstrated in excellent work culture (quality and meticulous), humble or respectful, obedient, good personality, helpful, and high integrity. Self-esteem is not something to find and be found, but must be developed through social interaction of each individual. Thus, self-esteem can be conceptualised as personal values outlined by one's belief, faith, character, language, culture and patriotism reflected through consistent behaviour. In short, an individual with self-esteem

is a person with identity (Wan Muhammad, 2010). According to Erikson (1968), an individual with identity possesses high self-confidence and self-value, allowing him to be receptive towards other people's opinions and ideas based on his ability, loyalty, values and dignity. These characters can be developed systematically and are a life-long effort. Individual with strong self-esteem has always been linked with honesty, moral astuteness, trustworthiness, steadfastness and faithfulness.

Steinberg (1985) had listed five psychosocial aspects that affect the development of an individual's self-esteem from childhood to adulthood: (1) self-esteem development that covers the effort to understand and accept one's self-efficacy; (2) personal autonomy, (3) the process that makes a person becomes independent and able to make decision; (4) looking for and building close relationship with peers based on trust, openness, and similarities in values; (5) pengurusan personal sexuality development management, and the need to achieve something and being recognised for it. All the five aspects are inter-related and give a strong influence among each other. Studies in developmental psychology often associated teenagers with strong self-esteem as an individual who knows himself. They were aware with the changes in personal development from the aspects of cognitive or thinking, emotion and feeling, social and physical. The importance on this awareness of those aspects is in line with the National Education Philosophy that aims to produce the nation's human resource who have exceptional holistic self-esteem; one that covers the cognitive, affective and psychomotor to achieve selfharmony while at the same time contributing towards peace and harmony for family, society and nation. The latest studies on teenagers' self-esteem were more focused on matters that contribute to self-esteem development such as self-discrepancies, self-esteem stability, selfefficacy, self-related motivation, and self-regulation. Hence, holistic self-esteem development covers thinking, emotion, social, physical and mental aspects and it helps in producing quality leadership characteristics. In short, self-esteem development is an important aspect that should be emphasized in the national education system because it could help in producing quality future generation.

### **Research Background**

Studies on gifted and talented students have gained traction in the education world today. However, the studies were normally concentrating on the cognitive quality and ignoring the students' social and emotional needs. Their individual quality was always linked to their personal characteristics in leading themselves and others (Sternberg, 2005). The current trend in the research on gifted and talented students is shifting towards their ability in dealing and adjusting themselves with. Findings from local and international studies showed that they faced various socio-emotional issues that would prevent their potential development to the maximum level (Verstenynen, 2013; Scott, 2012; Abu Yazid & Aliza, 2009; Rosadah, 2003; Lovecky, 1992).

The development of holistic personal and nationalistic self-esteem would be able to produce human capitals that help propel the nation to international fame. With this goal in mind, the development of gifted and talented self-esteem should be given proper attention and it needs to be tackled using multiple approaches. The gifted and talented students are regarded as valuable assets and future leaders since they possess excellent leadership qualities and ability to motivate those around them (Rorlinda et al., 2015). The study done by Rosadah (2003) also found that the gifted and talented students displayed a higher leadership potential compared to mediocre students. The natural leadership quality should be combined with the self-esteem values which are holistic and balanced, in tandem with the National Education Philosophy.

However, psychologists discovered that the gifted and talented students known to have high cognitive and creative ability with high task commitment, also faced psychosocioemotional issues (Versteynen, 2013; Abu Yazid & Aliza 2009; Rosadah 2003), caused by asynchronous development between their mental and chronological age. Besides that, they are also more sensitive towards personality conflict and experience higher isolation and pressure compared to normal students, caused by their high cognitive ability (Neihart, 1999; Grossberg & Cornell; 1988; Silverman, 1987; Roedell, 1986; Tannenbaum, 1983). In other words, the high development in cognitive ability, followed by the medium growth in other components (emotion, social and spiritual) produce psychosocial and emotional issues in them. This psycho-socio-emotion imbalance has the potential to affect other psychological conditions such as: emotional intensity, perfectionism, high anxiety level, high sensitivity, overexcitability, high social justice sensitivity, highly self-critical, difficulty in adapting to new environment, and lacking in social and communication skills (Abu Yazid & Noriah, 2016; Rosadah 2003), and would potentially influence their behavioural inclination. The gifted and talented students burdened by critical psycho-socio-emotion sometimes would isolate themselves and become passive, exposing themselves to be a bully victim by their peers. To overcome this, the students tend to hide their intelligence and create another self-esteem away from their original self to be accepted socially. This scenario matches claim made by Gross (1998) who opined that the gifted and talented children and teenagers' self-esteem development is more complicated than their normal peers, because it should start from early childhood and continue throughout their life.

Therefore, this case study was conducted to assess the level and develop the early self-esteem of the gifted and talented students in Pusat PERMATA pintar™ Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), to predict their probable behaviour. This centre, started in 2011, was a pilot school that identified and placed gifted and talented students from all over Malaysia. Specifically, this study analysed the level of self-esteem and personality of the participants in six main components: mind, emotion, spiritual, physical, leadership, and citizenship. This study also analysed the difference in self-esteem based on gender and race.

### **Methodology**

This descriptive quantitative study used the survey method to measure the level of self-esteem among respondents. Data was collected using survey questions developed based on literature review of past studies. The questionnaire was distributed to 194 respondents who were randomly chosen among the gifted and talented students who studied in Kolej PERMATApintar™ Negara 2015 academic session. From that number, 80 students (41.2%) were from Level 2 (between 15 and 17 years old), 80 students (41.2%) were Level 1 (between 14 and 15 years old), and 34 students (17.5%) were Foundation 2 (between 12 and 14 years old). From the total, 106 (54.64%) of them were female and 88 (45.36%) male. From the race composition, there were 165 (85.05%) Malays, 15 (7.7%) Chinese, 4 (2.1%) Indians, and 10 (5.2%) students who were Sikh, Sabah and Sarawak indigenous.

The instrument used was Gifted and Talented Student's Self-esteem Questionnaire (SSJD-PPB) that consist six constructs that covered the self-esteem characteristics studied. The constructs were mind, Emotion, Spiritual, Physical, Leadership, and Citizenship. Every construct has 12 items, totaling 72 items overall. The choice of response for every item was based on 5-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neutral, 4-Agree, and 5-Strongly Disagree). From the pilot test, the Cronbach Alpha score received was 0.962, indicating a high validity and suitability in the instrument developed.

Data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0. Descriptive analysis was done to determine the level and establish the respondent's self-esteem profile, based on the components including the gender and race demography.

### Findings

Findings showed overall mean score of gifted and talented students' self-esteem who participated in this study to be 3.86 (refer Table 1). Based on the determined scale of low (1.00–2.33), medium (2.34–3.66), and high (3.67–5.00), the mean self-esteem score among respondents found to be quite high.

Table 1  
*Respondents' Self-Esteem Mean Score*

Variable	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self-esteem	194	3.86	6.41

Specifically, the gifted and talented students studied had a combination of medium and high self-esteem level, in which 54 (27.8%) respondents were at medium level, 140 (72.2%) at the highest level (refer Table 2).

Table 2  
*Respondents' Self-Esteem Level*

Variable	n	Level	Frequency	%
Self-esteem	194	Low (1.00–2.33)	0	0
		Medium (2.34–3.66)	54	27.8
		High (3.67–5.00)	140	72.2

Table 3 illustrated detail respondents' self-esteem profile based on the components studied. From the six components studied, spiritual self-esteem managed to get the highest mean score of 4.13, followed by citizenship (mean=3.91), emotion (mean=3.86), mind (mean=3.85), physical (mean=3.82), and leadership (mean=3.63).

Table 3  
*Detailed Self-Esteem Profile Based on Mean Score*

Self-esteem Component	Mean	Standard Deviation
Mind	3.85	0.496
Emotion	3.86	0.505
Spiritual	4.13	0.453
Physical	3.82	0.557
Leadership	3.63	0.511
Citizenship	3.91	0.492

Table 4 illustrates self-esteem profile when compared to gender and race demographic factor. Specifically, female's self-esteem level was higher (mean=3.90) compared to male (mean=3.83), whereas Indian students' self-esteem level was higher (mean=3.94) than Malay (mean=3.90), Chinese (mean=3.72), and other races (men=2.62).

Table 4  
*Detailed Self-Esteem Profile Compared to Demographic Factor*

Self- esteem Profile	Gender				Race	
	M (n=88)	F (n=106)	M (n=165)	C (n=15)	I (n=4)	Others (n=10)
Mean	3.83	3.90	3.90	3.72	3.94	2.62
Standard Deviation	.36	.46	.367	.528	.722	.296

### Discussion

In general, early findings revealed that the gifted and talented students who studied under the same roof in Pusat PERMATApintar™ Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) had respectable medium and high self-esteem. It depicted that the population who became the respondents in the study had high self-esteem translated through their personal belief, faith, personality, culture and citizenship (Teo Kok Seong, 2013). Positive personality was proven through the results that presented the respondents high score in spiritual component, followed by citizenship, emotion, mind, physical and leadership. The findings could be influenced by the exposure to various activities using the differentiated curriculum practised in Pusat PERMATApintar™ Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), especially through interactive learning in the National Self-Esteem Development course. The learning objective of the course is to develop students holistically in their physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, leadership and citizenship aspects. The leadership component should be given more serious focus as the intervention programme for leadership quality should take place from the early stage in PERMATApintar™ education programme.

However, the outcomes regarding the level of self-esteem based on racial groups revealed a concern since the Malay respondents who were the majority shown to have lower self-esteem compared to the Indians, while the Chinese were found to have the lowest self-esteem among the three major races in Malaysia. The results mimicked the studies by Tan Chee-Beng (2000) and Teo Kok Seong (2006) who found the phenomenon in the use of improper language among the Malays that could relate to their lower self-esteem, while the Chinese refused to uphold the Malay identity (in the use of Malay) as the national cultural identity. In other words, the overall self-esteem understanding among the gifted and talented is a must to ensure the nation's growth, sovereignty and peace could be maintained and strengthened.

The findings revealed the population of gifted and talented students in Pusat PERMATApintar™ Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) had good level of self-esteem that would encourage them to behave positively. In other words, their strong self-esteem could help them avoid negative behaviours in their learning environment.

### Conclusion

In summary, the strength in self-esteem could become a strong trait in developing the gifted and talented student's personality. Since the psychological aspect is critical in determining the success of the gifted and talented students, the guidance and counselling service has to take into consideration holistic development that covers every aspect of individual's self-esteem. This service is required to support the unique learning needs of the students. Other than that, proper planning that enriches outside classroom learning experience creatively through experiential and meaningful learning could lead to higher resilience among them. Thus, the process of developing the gifted and talented students' self-esteem should be implemented formally and informally, planned carefully, creatively

and fulfilled the learning approach suitable with their unique capability, so that their spirit and self-appreciation would grow naturally.

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