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The Effects of Shyness on Scholastic Experience A Review of the Literature



by Rebecca Thomas

Shyness can affect adjustment into school, teacher–student relationships, and scholastic achievement. This literature review covers several studies published in the past 10 years on the effects of shyness and introversion on scholastic experience. Research implies that shy students have a more difficult time adjusting to new environments and school settings than their non-shy peers. Most research indicates that teacher–student relationships are weaker when students are shy, and that teachers are more likely to underestimate introverted students' academic abilities. Whereas shy students perform well on group tests, they often perform significantly below average on individually administered tests. Further research should be done on the effects of shyness on scholastic experience in order to increase understanding of shy students' setbacks. This could enable shy students to be compared more fairly to their non-shy peers in academic settings, and help teachers know how to reach shy students more effectively.

The Effects of Shyness on School Experience

Approximately 42% of children are shy (Zimbardo, 1977). Zimbardo (1977) defined shyness as an internal suffering one experiences while participating in normal social interactions. Stereotypically, shy people are usually quiet and nervous in social situations, and are often distrustful and wary of strangers. While shyness has no real effect on intelligence or cognitive abilities, it does have the potential to have a large influence on children and adults in scholastic settings.

School can be a very different experience for shy people because they tend to have a difficult time feeling comfortable interacting with other people (Zimbardo, 1977). While show-and-tell may make the average elementary school student feel excited to be in the spotlight, it could cause a shy student stress for an extended period of time. Similarly, shy college students giving a presentation could know the material they are teaching well, but their shyness could inhibit their ability to share their knowledge and wisdom to its full extent. Because of these types of problems, many research studies have been conducted concerning shyness and introversion and its effects on scholastic experience. Research specifically reports that shyness can affect students of all ages in adjustment to school, teacher-student relationships, and academic achievement and aptitude.

Adjustment to School

Research suggests that shy students have a difficult time adjusting in new environments, and school is no exception (Asendorp, 2000). In coping with changes in schooling, many shy students place great emphasis on returning to familiarity (Asendorp, 2000). For example, responses to a survey showed that shy students encountering their first year of college call home more often than most students, keep in closer contact with previous friends, and avoid new social situations presented at the college (Asendorp, 2000). Shy college students have been shown to have higher levels of boredom than non-shy college students, and this boredom could be a contributing factor to increased levels of home-sickness (Maroldo, 1986). Boredom is often associated with excess free time, giving shy students more time to think about home and what they miss about it. Similarly, young children may wish to spend more time at home or with their family during the start of school, just to make sure a percentage of their life remains constant (Coplan, Arbeau, & Armer, 2008). People enjoy comfort, and shy people find comfort in familiarity. Having places and people that comfort shy students can assist their transition into new experiences.

In one study done on adolescents' adjustment to college, a survey was administered to 350 diverse college freshmen. Each student took tests that measured shyness, friendship quality, loneliness, and depression. The findings were that shy students were more likely to be lonely, have less friendship quality, and in consequence, have either minor or major symptoms of depression (Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006). Symptoms of depression can influence every aspect of a person's life, including desire and well-being. A self-report survey reported that shy students are much more likely to lose the desire to make goals, socialize, or try hard in school (Sreeshakumar, Nagalakshmi, & D'Souza, 2007). This loss of desire can cause their self-esteem to be impacted negatively (Sreeshakumar et al., 2007). Similarly, another survey reported that shy students are much more likely to become passive in school, and their perceived social weaknesses can eventually spiral into perceived weaknesses in everything (Paulsen, Bru, & Murberg, 2006).

Shy students in a new school often suffer academically because of the overwhelming worries and distractions thrust upon them in a short period of time. In group activities, shy students often prefer to look on as opposed to fully participate, keeping them from comprehending the concepts that the activities were meant to teach (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008). Because of this inhibition, lack of confidence with other people, and perceived inability to communicate effectively, shy students often view themselves as less competent than non-shy individuals (Feng, 2006). It is difficult for people to feel like they fit into a new environment when they feel inferior, and thus, feeling inferior can cause shy individuals to become even more isolated (Mounts et al., 2006).

Studies regarding shy students' adjustment into school generally employ the same basic method. In some studies reviewed, researchers would take a certain number of students and give them a self-report measure to determine their level of shyness. In a few studies, teachers or parents would also take a similar test about their students' or children's shyness. After this, most researchers would instruct teachers or parents to observe the students' behavior, and fill out a questionnaire regarding how students would react in certain situations (Mounts et al., 2006). While this method is respectable, it has errors. Self-report measures can be accurate; however, they can also vary depending on the time of day, and the self-perception (which is not always accurate) of the test-taker. In addition to these variations, different parents and teachers are likely to fill out the questionnaire differently. For example, a highly extroverted teacher may compare her students to herself,

causing scores in her classroom to imply that there are more shy students than are actually there. Similarly, parents may only see their child when he or she is comfortable at home, and not know their child's shyness level in other environments.

These studies may be strengthened by both having participants fill out a self-report measure of their perceived shyness and having teachers and parents fill out a shyness measure about the students. Also, all the students should have the same teacher in order to reduce error in ratings on the questionnaire. In addition to this change, researchers ideally would be able to observe students in the classroom environment and at recess in the case of elementary school students. This way, an objective third party with education in research and shyness could be able to record data as well, and then the data from the teacher and the researcher could be compared to see if they are consistent. Adding these methodological approaches would increase both the validity and reliability of the research.

Teacher-Student Relationships

In addition to school adjustment, shyness can also affect students' relationships with their teachers. Teacher-student relationships vary greatly, depending on the student or the teacher. Some shy students bond with their teachers more easily than their peers, and are more likely to develop relationships with their authority figures than their classmates. However, some shy students may be frightened of their teachers, especially if the teacher is particularly strict or judgmental (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008). Because of the extreme variation between personalities of teachers, research in this respect is inconclusive.

Some studies have found that shyness promotes negative teacher-student relationships. Opt and Loffredo's study implied that introverted people tended to be high in communication apprehension (2000). Fear of anticipated communication, or communication apprehension, (Opt & Loffredo, 2000) may have contributed to why some shy students felt that their relationships with their teachers were limited (Lund, 2008). In qualitative interviews with shy adolescents, many shy students expressed their frustration on feeling invisible and constantly being ignored by their teachers (Lund, 2008). Participants in this study felt that extroverted students often got more academic attention than introverted students, and that teachers seemed to think students who spoke up more in class discussions were more intelligent. In support to that claim, a study was done where teachers were to rate each of their student's intelligence levels,

and then all the students took a standardized test (Hughes & Coplan, 2010). The results showed that teachers tended to rate shy students to be lower in intelligence than their standardized test scores indicated. This could be because introverted students are more likely to be passive in classroom settings than extroverted students (Murberg, 2010). Murberg conducted a study that implied that introverted students were less likely to participate in class discussions and start conversations with teachers (2010). Talkative students may stand out to teachers, causing introverted students to be underestimated.

On the other hand, another study found shy students to have stronger relationships with their teachers than non-shy students did. Arbeau, Coplan, and Weeks found that first-grade teachers often give shy children more attention because they feel the need to do so (2010). In addition to this, the study claimed that the same first-grade teachers attempted to make the transition easier for all students, both shy and non-shy. It could be that teachers of younger students are more sympathetic toward shyness than secondary teachers or college professors are. However, that theory has yet to be supported with further research.

Multiple methods were used in measuring student-teacher relationships. For example, the study done by Lund was strictly qualitative (2008). In his study, he interviewed less than 10 adolescent girls that self-identified themselves as being shy, and recorded their responses (Lund, 2008). While his interviews were highly in depth, his conclusions were limited due to a tiny sample size, and the fact that he only interviewed one gender. After interviewing the girls, Lund found points that all or most of the girls had said and named them to be the results of his study. In order to strengthen this research, more interviews should be done with a much larger and more diverse group, with both males and females. Also, in order to create a comparative sample, both shy and non-shy students should be interviewed. In the case of the other studies, they were done in a similar fashion to the adjustment studies (and some of them overlapped with adjustment and academic achievement studies). Observing students in multiple environments and administering shyness measures to students, teachers, and parents would help researchers get a more accurate estimation of students' shyness levels in future studies.

Academic Achievement and Aptitude

So far, many studies have found that shy students tend to have disadvantages at school, particularly in adjustment to school and

teacher-student relationships. However, these disadvantages do not always hinder academic achievement. Crozier & Hostettler (2003) found that the difference in math scores on a standardized test between shy and non-shy students was not statistically significant. However, that same study noted that shy students scored particularly lower in verbal examinations, and had a lower average score for English tests as well (Crozier & Hostettler, 2003).

Shy students also perform better on group-administered tests (written tests given to multiple people at once), such as the ACT, than on individually administered tests (verbal tests administered to only one person at a time), like an IQ test (Hughes & Coplan, 2010). AbdElBaset (1994) found that introverted female students scored higher on the SAT than extroverted female students. However, Aubeau et al. reported that when shy students' group test scores were the same as their peers, teacher ratings of shy students were still significantly lower than their test scores, indicating that, in a verbal or social context, shy students appeared less intelligent (2010). On the other hand, Hughes and Coplan (2010) found that, for individually administered tests, shy students performed, on average, one standard deviation below the mean.

Some argue that shy students perform poorly on individual tests because of their low self-esteem and self-belief; however, others believe low self-esteem is a consequence of having poor cognitive abilities (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). One study found that self-concept of math was not correlated with self-concept of English. Students' perceived abilities of one subject did not affect their perceived abilities of another subject (Crozier, 2001). Results of studies have indicated that low self-concept influences test performances because shy students perform well on group-administered tests that are essentially measuring the same material as individually administered tests (Crozier, 2001). Anticipatory anxiety is also much more prevalent in shy students, especially in areas they are uncomfortable with, which could cause test scores to drop (Vassilopoulos, 2009).

Methods for these research studies included self-report shyness measures. Due to this, there was a possibility of measurement error. However, standardized tests were all administered in the same fashion, indicating that those scores were as close to accurate as possible. Even though these studies imply that shy students perform badly only on verbal tests, further research would be required to draw a firm conclusion.

Conclusion

Shyness can affect students of all ages in adjustment to school, teacher-student relationships, and academic achievement and aptitude. Starting

in a new scholastic environment can be particularly challenging for shy students, and can cause them to seek familiarity, and withdraw from new experiences, which often holds them back. Most teachers consider shy students to be less intelligent than they really are, and a few teachers offer shy students special attention. While shy students perform on par with their peers in group and written tests, they often fall behind in individual and verbal examinations. Unfortunately, more research is needed to further support these claims.

With more understanding of the effects of shyness on various aspects of scholastic experience, more can be done to help shy students cope and succeed in traditional academic settings. One cannot fix a problem unless one knows of its existence. Raising awareness of findings of studies relating to shyness and school can help students (shy and non-shy), teachers, and parents of shy students understand how shyness typically affects performance, relationships, and adjustment to school. Expanding these findings can pave the way for further studies on all aspects of shyness and school, and can eventually aid in finding a way to put shy students on exactly the same playing field as non-shy students, and help enable all students to succeed.

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