The Relationship of Social Integration and Personal Development among University Students in Thailand

Naltan Lampadan & Darrin Thomas

Abstract

Social integration is a key component of the goals of higher education. Personal growth is often a result of pursuing higher education. The purpose of this study was to investigate the students' perceptions of social integration and personal growth. A cross-sectional survey design using a sample of 129 students revealed that the students have a low perception of their social integration while having a moderately high perception of their personal growth. There was no difference in perception of the variables of this study when comparisons were made by class level, gender, or major. A weak correlation was found between social integration and personal growth (n = 124, r = .20, p < 0.05).

Keywords: *Personal development, university students, social integration*

Introduction

Constant changes in contemporary societies challenge each individual to make important adjustment in their lives. In an increasingly globalized society, schools recognize the importance of strengthening social integration among students.   The transition from high school to university is a difficult step, both in academic and social terms.   In order to support students in their new environment, schools must create programs that promote social integration among the campus community. Ozben (2013) noted that students reported higher levels of satisfaction when a campus community has a strong social life. The quality of life improves when students are integrated into the social atmosphere of the school.   Therefore, university must play an important role in providing students with the opportunity to develop their social life and to practice social integration as they learn and grow. As students attempt towards higher levels of schooling, training and employment, social skill becomes increasingly important. As such, this research study attempts to understand the correlation between social integration and student's development. This study will look into how students' social integration contributes to their personal development.

In order to have authentic information, quantitative study is employed to understand the impact of social integration on students' development in a school setting at a faith-based university in central Thailand.

Literature Review

Social Integration

Social integration plays a critical role in the lives of university students in connecting them with the university community. Students who are more involved are satisfied, happy, and have more positive experiences (Phillips, 1967). Therefore, it is important to assess if social integration serves a similar role in Thailand. Social integration refers to the feeling of being a part of, and feeling equally valued and supported in a school community. MacDonald and Leary (2005) stated that the need for social belonging, for seeing oneself as socially connected—is a basic human motivation. Lin (2010) defined social integration as an involvement with other people that brought students insight,

positive learning experiences, modeling and a sense of assurance in terms of developing interpersonal relationship. According to Bean (2005), "social support and close friendships form the core components of social integration. Students derive satisfaction from these social attachments…feeling supported increase[s] a student's self-confidence" (p. 228).

Furthermore, peer interaction, whether academic or non-academic, positively relates to effective study habits and academic success. Students who interact with others within their college are more likely to have a positive self-image, convey greater motivation, and to reach graduation and exhibit better learning and employment outcomes. In other words, student success is both directly and indirectly related to feelings of social support. Social support is frequently used in much socio-psychological and socio-educational research that emphasizes the importance of social relationship among community members (Awang, 2012; Demaray et al., 2010; Peters, 2010; Topping & Foggie, 2010; Yaeda, 2010).

Piaget (1975) proposed that when interacting with diverse peers, students are able to engage in debates and actively confront the differences between their own point of view and that of others. Researchers indicated that high-quality friendships have positive effects on students: fostering their self-esteem, improving their social adjustment, and increasing their ability to cope with stressors (Hartup & Stevens, 1999). Ozben (2013) revealed that students' emphasis on cooperating with peers within small groups also develops their sense of friendship and competence and this could be supportive for learning and well-being. Hixenbaugh, Dewart and Towell (2013) pointed out that those students who reported having higher levels of social support indicated higher level of integration into the university and greater interaction with their peers and were more satisfied with their university experience. Friendships are very much an important aspect of the life of a student. It is considered the hallmark of the life of a student.

Students tend to develop their social skills through social interaction with others. Astin (1993), in a multi-dimensional study of college impact, found that socializing with someone from a different racial background supported an increase in cultural awareness, commitment to racial understanding, and commitment to the environment. Chang, Astin, and Kim (2004) concluded that cross-racial interaction (CRI) positively predicted intellectual, social, and civic development. Having experienced working with people from diverse backgrounds positively impact the development of students of their social abilities and students gradually developed a capacity for tolerance, problem-solving, ability to work with others, and appreciation of and respect for diversity (Denson & Zang, 2010; Lin, 2010). A national longitudinal study of 25,000 undergraduates at 217 four-year colleges and universities showed that institutional policies fostering diversity of the campus community had positive effects on students' cognitive development, satisfaction with the college experience, and leadership abilities (Astin, 1993). It is also important that students have opportunities to learn from one another's varied experiences and perspectives. To encourage young people to see things from different perspectives and to help them to make informed decisions, schools must provide the opportunity for students to be seen, valued, cared for and respected.

Having an involved family can be key to a student's success in college. Support from family has been found to reduce the impact of psychological problems among students (Calvete & Connor-Smith, 2006). According to Oswald and Suss (1994), there are three dimensions of support provided by family and friend. These dimensions are warmth, behavioral control, and psychological autonomy-granting. These dimensions expedite the development of positive self-conceptions and social skills, responsibility and competence.

The combination of family and friend support also plays a role in students' academic performance. Silbereisen and Todt (1994) claimed that when family and friends provide support to students, students' positive behavior increased. This would lead to less misconduct, less psychological distress, and less delinquency among students of all social classes, which in turn would produce significant effects on students' academic achievement. Therefore, it could be concluded that social support from family plays an important role in dealing with psychological problems. This

means that the higher the social support from the family and friends, the lower the psychological problems. This leads to a greater academic achievement and life satisfaction.

Most studies suggest that people who regularly attend religious services are more satisfied with their lives because they build social networks in their congregations. Yonker, Schanbelrauch and DeHaan (2012) proposed that students who are involved in spiritual program are benefited with a stronger relationship and a positive social network. Witter and colleagues (1985) undertook a meta-analysis of 28 studies and found that in most of these studies, religion is positively associated with subjective well-being. Elliott and Hayward (2007) observed that spirituality or religion plays a positive role in providing a network of social support that leads to well-being. Idler (2008) also suggested that social groups are of benefit not only because they promote rules for living, but also because social groups care and support each other. The results of a survey at Duke University found that regular attendees at religious services reported an overall larger social network and a stronger feeling of support from all of the members of their social circles (Ellison & Levin, 1998). They added that spiritual life is about commitment to a way of thinking and behaving that honors principles of inter-being and interconnectedness. Chaney (2008) explained in her study that social network can be experienced when a person gets involved in spiritual program. Studies show that people who are actively involved in spiritual programs and committed to their religion have a higher level of subjective well-being. In other words, religious program offers personal networks, support and subjective well-being.

Personal Development

The college years are a time of significant growth and change for students as they confront new ideas and experiences that may challenge what they already know and believe. A university that understands these changes can design courses and activities that meet students' needs and support their continued development.

Aristotle's theory on personal development defines personal development as a category of practical wisdom, where the practice of virtues leads to happiness but more accurately understood as human flourishing or living well. It is a way for students to assess their skills and qualities, consider their aims in life and set goals in order to realize and maximize their potential. This theory is well defined in Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of personal development for young adults during their undergraduate years. The seven vectors are developing competence, managing emotions, achieving autonomy and interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose and developing integrity. Martikainen (2009) added that life-satisfaction, happiness, and social relations are vital to psychological well-being. Denson and Zang (2010) believed that engaging students in various social activities contributes to the development of students' positive attributes. Martin, Mansour, Anderson, Gibson, Liem, and Sudmalis (2013) found that personal growth, achievement and satisfaction are the result to students' active involvement in university program. Personal growth and development is a transformational process and it is often triggered by an important life event that inspires young people to improve and empower themselves by discovering where their full potential lies.

Research Questions

The main research question of this study is: How significant is the correlation between social integration and student's development. The study focuses on the impact of social integration on personal development namely friendship, support and emotional well-being, Based on the review of literature, the following questions were developed.
1. What are the perceptions of the university students concerning social integration and personal development at their university?

2. Is there a difference in the university students' perception of their social integration or personal development when comparison is made by gender, major or field of study, year of study, nationality and religious affiliation?
3. What is the relationship between perception of social integration and personal development among university students?

Schools believe that social integration of the students have a positive impact on students' personal development. The result of this study will help schools focus on improving students' development through their social integration programs.

Methodology

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed in this study. Participants needed to be undergraduate students at a faith-based university in Thailand. In all, a total of a 129 students participated in this study. When a non-random sampling method, such as purposive sampling, is employed, it is recommended to report the demographic characteristics of the sample (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

The demographics of the sample are as follows, for gender, 40% were male and 60% of the sample was female. For class level, 35% of the sample was Freshman, 35% were Sophomores, 21% were Juniors, and 9% were Seniors. In terms of study major, 14% were business students, 59% were education students, 21% were English students, 5% were religion students, and 1% were science students. Lastly, for religious orientation, 78% of the participants were Christian, 17% were Buddhist, and 5% were of another religious orientation.

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey designed was used in this study. Survey forms were distributed and collected by the researchers at a university in Thailand. The participants responded to a 20-item instrument that assessed their perception of social integration and personal development. Data collection was done at a time that was mutually convenient for both the researchers and participants of this study.

Instruments

The instrument of this study consisted of two parts. Part one included demographics items such as major or field of study, year of study, gender, major, and religious affiliation. The demographic questioned served the purpose of providing descriptive data about the participants as well as for distinguishing between groups for analysis.

Part two of the instrument was the items related to the variables of this study. Two scales were used. The names of these scales are Social Integration Scale and the Personal Growth Scale.

Social Integration Scale

The Social Integration scale was adapted from Ross and Straus (1997). The components of this scale were statements that assessed beliefs in law/social control (commitment to conventional behavior), involvement, network availability, and associations with those who break laws. Sample statements from this scale include "I share my thoughts with a family member", "I attend church, temple, or mosque once a month or more", and "It is all right to break the law as long as you don't get hurt." A Likert scale was employed with

1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree for each item of this scale.

A principal component analysis was performed in order to summarize the number of items necessary for analysis as well as to assess the appropriateness of this scale for the context of this study. The principal component analysis found 3 components that explained 62% of the variance of social integration. Component one described family relationships and included such an item as "I have family member who would help me out if I had a problem." Component two described relationships with friends who committed crimes and include such an item as "I spend time with friends who have been in trouble with the law." Lastly, component three described religious integration and includes such an item as "I attend a church, temple, or mosque once a month or more." The Cronbach Alpha for the modified 8-item scale was 0.60.

Personal Growth Scale

The Personal Growth Scale was adapted from Robitschek et. al (2012). This scale included items that assessed readiness for change, use of resources, and intentional behavior. Sample statements from this scale include "I take every opportunity to grow as it comes up" and "I can tell when I am ready to make specific changes in myself." Items of this scale were measured by a Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

In order to summarize as well as assess the appropriateness of the scale for the context, a principal component analysis was performed. The principal component analysis found three components that explained 63% of the variance of personal growth. Component one described planning for change and included such an item as "I know how to make a realistic plan in order to change in myself." Component two described allocating resources for intentional change and includes such an item as "I use resources when I try to grow." Lastly, component three described searching for help when desiring change and include such an item as "I ask for help when I try to change myself." The Cronbach Alpha for the modified 12-item scale was 0.86.

Data Analysis

Descriptive data was collected during this study. For each item and for each variable, means and standard deviations were calculated. T-test and ANOVA analysis was conducted to determine if there were any differences in the sub-groups of class level, gender, and major. Religious orientation was not analyzed for differences of means due to the huge disparity of the number of Christians ($n = 101$) to Buddhist ($n = 22$) and those of the category of other ($n = 6$). Lastly, a correlational analysis was used to assess the relationship between social integration and personal development.

For the t-test and ANOVA, the equality of variance was assessed using the Levene statistic. The results indicated that the variance was similar for social integration when comparisons were made by class level ($F =1.12$, $p > .01$), gender ($F = .14$, $p = > .01$), major ($F = .76$, $p > .01$). The variance was also acceptable for personal growth when comparisons were made by class level ($F =2.4$, $p >.01$), gender ($F = .18$, $p = > .01$), major ($F =3.38$, $p > .01$). In addition, a Q-Q plot was assessed to ascertain if the sample was normally distributed for each variable. Figure 1 and 2 show the Q-Q plot for social integration and personal growth. The results indicated that the assumption of normality was met.
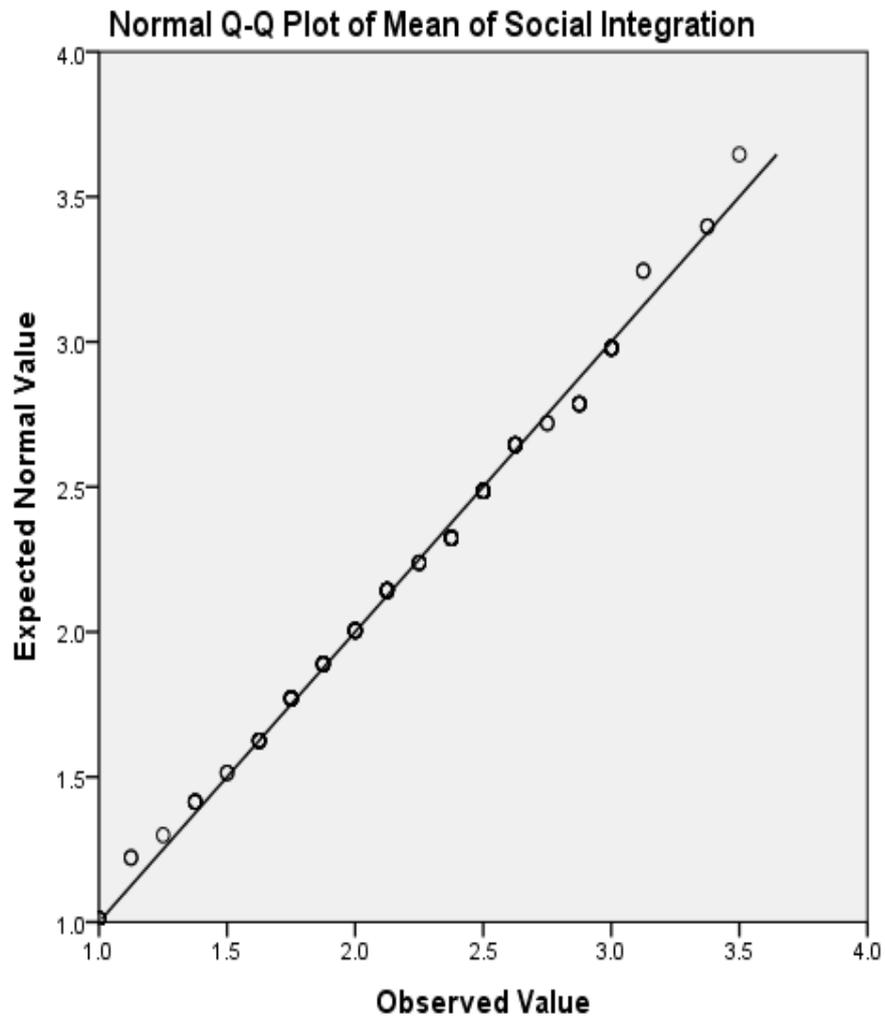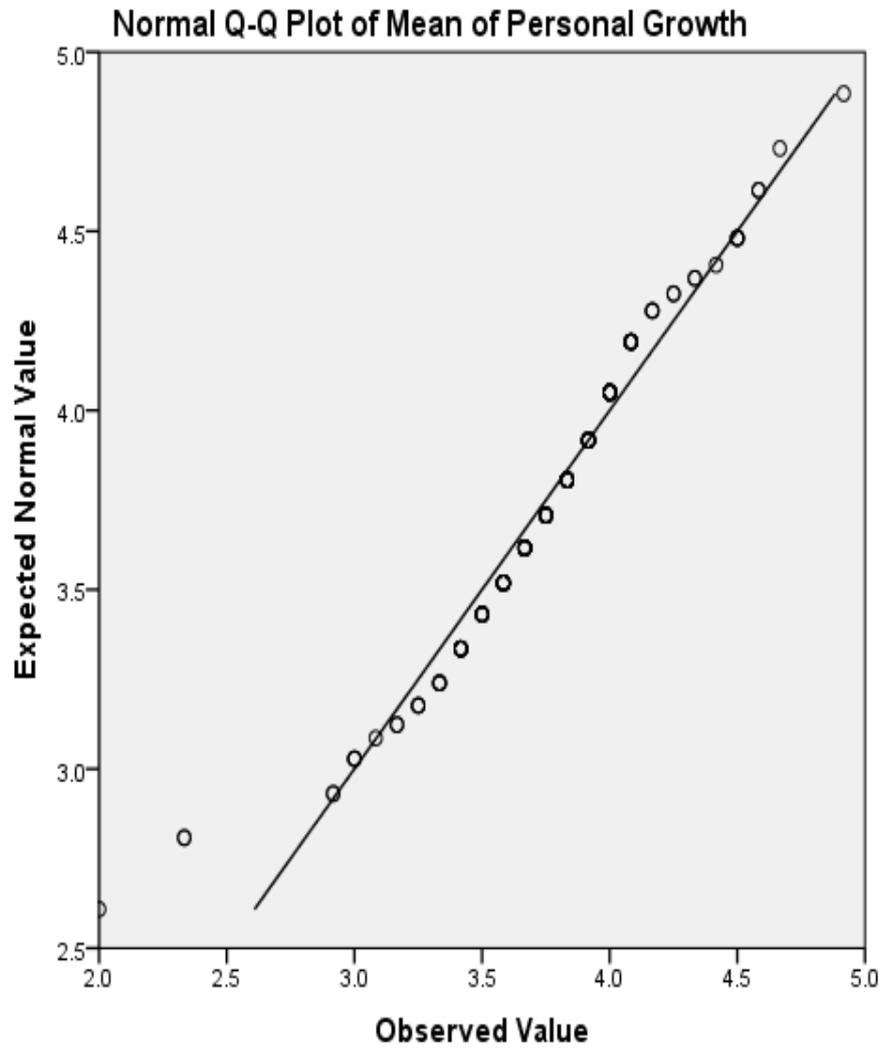
Figure 1. Q-Q plot of social integration

Figure 2. Q-Q plot of personal growth

Results

The students' perceptions of social integration and personal growth are summarized in Table 1.

Survey Items	M	SD
1. It is all right to break the law as long as you don't get hurt.	2.01	.88
2. To get ahead, I have done some things which are not right.	2.58	1.04
3. I spend time with friends who have been in trouble with the law.	2.62	1.06
4. I have friends that have committed crimes.	2.30	1.16
5. I have family members who would help me out if I had a problem.	2.06	1.06
6. I share my thoughts with a family member.	2.11	1.04
7. I have goals in life that I try to reach.	1.67	.90
8. I attend a church, temple, or mosque once a month or more.	2.26	1.22
9. I can tell when I am ready to make specific changes in myself.	3.67	.73
10. I know how to make a realistic plan in order to change myself.	3.76	.68
11. I take every opportunity to grow as it comes up.	3.84	.63
12. When I try to change myself, I make a realistic plan for my personal growth.	3.82	.59
13. I ask for help when I try to change myself.	3.51	.91
14. I actively work out to improve myself.	3.83	.73
15. I know how to set realistic goals to make changes in myself.	3.82	.65
16. I know when I need to make a specific change in myself	3.84	.65
17. I use resources when I try to grow.	3.79	.64
18. I know steps I can take to make intentional changes in myself.	3.67	.70
19. I actively seek out help when I try to change myself.	3.56	.81
20. I know when it's time to change specific things about myself.	3.88	.67

Table 1. Survey item results

For items that assessed social integration, the majority of the items indicated a perception of disagreement with the items. For example, respondents disagree with item 7 which assessed whether they had goals in life they are trying to reach ($M = 1.67$, $SD = .90$). Respondents also disagreed with item 1 which stated that it is all right to break the law as long as you don't get hurt ($M = 2.01$, $SD = .88$). In addition, respondents indicated that they disagree with item 2 that to get ahead, they have done some things which are not right ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.04$) and item 3 that they spend time with friends who have been in trouble with the law ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.06$). Lastly, respondents also indicated disagreement with item 8 which was a statement about attending church, temple or mosque once a month or more ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.22$).

For overall social integration, no difference was found when comparison was made by class level ($F = .92$, $p > .01$) gender ($t = .06$, $p > .01$) or major ($F = .52$, $p > .01$). Despite the groupings, the respondents' perception of social integration did not change. Overall, the students disagreed with the statements about social integration. This indicates that the items of the scale that assessed relationships with peers, family support, and religious integration were usually seen as concepts the respondents disagreed with.

For personal growth, the respondents indicated that they are neutral to agreeing with the items. For example, respondents indicated that they agree with item 17 that they use resources when they try to grow ($M = 3.79$, $SD = .64$). Furthermore, respondents indicated in item 20 that they know when it's time to change specific things about themselves ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .67$). Respondents also indicated in item 14 that they actively work out to improve themselves ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .73$) and in item 11 that they take every opportunity to grow as it comes up ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .63$). Lastly, item 19 indicates that the respondents agree that they actively seek out help when they are trying to change themselves ($M = 3.56$, $SD = .81$).

For overall personal growth, no difference was found when comparison was made by class level ($F = .84$, $p > .01$) gender ($t = .07$, $p > .01$), or major ($F = 2.16$, $p > .01$). Regardless of the grouping, the respondents' perception of personal growth did not change. Overall, the respondents' agreed with the statements about their personal growth indicating that they are making efforts to grow as indicated by the items of the scale.

A scatterplot was developed to assess the relationship between personal growth and social integration (Figure 3).
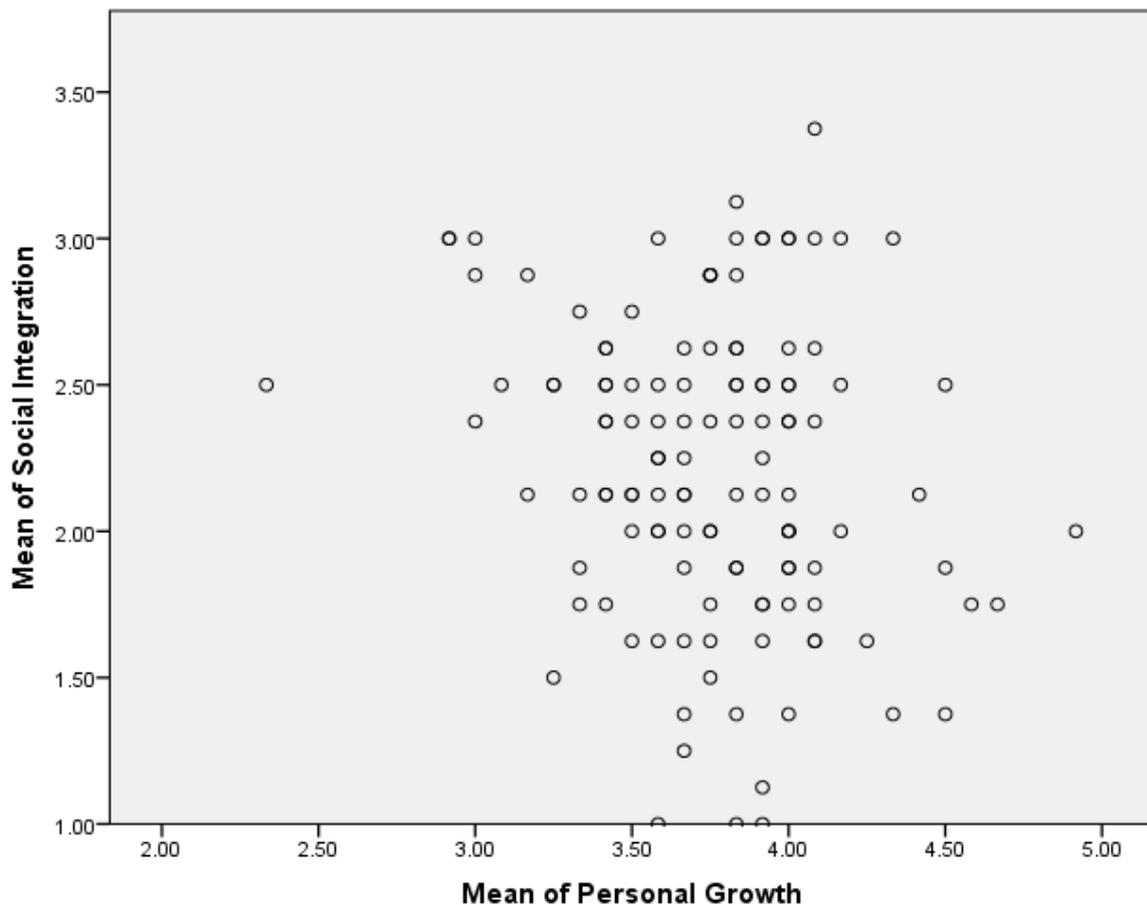
Figure 3. Correlation plot

A visual inspection of the scatterplot indicated a weak relationship between the personal growth and social integration. The results of the correlation analysis indicated that there is a weak relationship between the social integration and personal growth (r = .20, n = 124, p < 0.05, 95% [CI -.02, - .36]).

Discussion and Conclusions

While the findings in this study should not be considered as definitive evidence given the limitations of cross-sectional study with a short lag time, this study offer evidence for social integration mechanisms shaping social network as Lin (2010) stated that involvement with other people develop the sense of healthy interpersonal relationship. This is important in their personal growth.

The present study found a weak relationship between social integration and personal growth. While numerous studies show that social integration contributes to life satisfaction and personal growth (Bean, 2005; Hixenbaugh, Dewart & Towel, 2013; Ozben, 2013), this study do not provide convincing evidence that social integration correlates with personal growth.

Earlier literature showed that religious affiliation, family support and friendship networks expedite life satisfaction and subjective well-being. However, a number of unexpected findings from this study had been unearthed. First, the participants of this study do not perceive religious participation as a crucial element in their social life. The result suggests that religious participation is not necessarily perceived by the participant as means to strengthen their social integration. This finding indicated that frequency of religious attendance was not very significantly associated with personal growth. Second, the finding showed a weak evidence of seeking for family support. For many families, university has become an established staging post as young people become

independent adults. Therefore relationship is perceived as not an important factor for their social life in the university. This finding contradicted the findings of other researchers who found that families play an important role in social integration because they shape social relations and support (Miller, 2007; Silbereisen & Todt, 1994).

This finding however, showed that participants agreed that friendship is important to their social life. They also perceived that complying community rules as expected of them are important in their social network. This finding agrees with a number of studies (Hartup & Stevens, 1999; Hixenbaugh, Dewart & Towell, 2013; Ozben, 2013). This finding also indicated that participants are actively seeking to grow using resources and asking for help. Personal growth involves enhancement of all aspects of the person, the feelings the person has about himself or herself, and their effectiveness in living. It includes the development of positive life skills and the development of a realistic and healthy self-esteem.

Recommendation

Numerous studies showed that social integration contributes to the overall life satisfaction of students and that leads to their success. Therefore, the findings raise some issues that need to be taken seriously into consideration by schools in order to promote social integration.

1. Schools should make efforts to provide students with people who could provide assistance during times of difficulty.
2. Schools should develop a mechanism that promotes parental involvement in students' life at the university.
3. Schools should provide more attractive ways of encouraging attendance at religiously oriented events to enhance social environment and student integration.
4. Schools should continue to provide opportunities for students to grow by providing leadership opportunities, community service, informational support, and other forms of extra-curricular growth.
5. As social integration and personal growth have a weak relationship they could serve as predictor variables in a regression model of some other variable such as leadership, family support and religious commitment.

Limitations

There are two identified limitations of this study. (1) The questionnaire is conducted during summer program. Therefore, some students are not available to participate in the survey, and (2) this study search for a relationship between the variables. However, a correlation does not imply causation. (3) A more rigorous sampling method may improve the study.

Lastly, this study is delimited to two major areas. (1) This study is delimited to the relationship between social integration and student development, (2) this study is only conducted at a faith-based university in central Thailand.

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