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Academic failures among high school students: A comparative case study

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ABSTRACT

Background: The reasons for academic failures are very complex. They are multifaceted and interrelated, compounding and exacerbating the problem of school failure. The causes can be student related, school related or society related. Objective: The aim of the current study was to find out the factors behind the failures of the high school students in Kerala.

Methods: exploratory case studies were conducted among high school students with academic failures in government, government aided and private schools to get insight into the factors related to their underachievement. In-depth interviews were conducted along with standardized IQ tests and NIMHANS battery for specific learning disability to get multidimensional data about the students.

Results: Contrary to popular belief, the study did not find any significant relation between IQ of the students and their academic failures. Results also indicate that the type of school along with the socio economic status of the family, educational level and alcoholism of the parents are the key factors behind the academic failures of the high school students.

Conclusion: Identifying the factors that interfere with academic success is the first step in the process of choosing interventions to address the issue of academic failures. This study has found the relevance of school climate and family atmosphere along with personal factors such as hyperactivity and substance use in academic failures. Majority of the students with academic failures are found to have normal or above average IQ. Therefore, Individual counseling sessions for students with academic underachievement could be of help to overcome the barriers for academic success.

Keywords: Academic Underachievement, Academic Failure, High School Students.

INTRODUCTION

The reasons for academic failure are very complex. They are multifaceted and interrelated, compounding and exacerbating the problem of school failure. Identifying the factors that interfere with academic success is the first step in the process of choosing interventions to address this issue. Psychological, educational, and sociological research about this phenomenon has identified multiple student, school and family related factors leading to academic underachievement and failures. [1-3]. Academic difficulties have been linked to several factors intrinsic to students such as low IQ,[4] learning disabilities, mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression, and behavioral difficulties such as hyperactivity and attention deficit disorders.[1] Students are more likely to do well when there is a school culture which has an academic emphasis. [5] Academic achievement is also affected in complex ways by family stressors such as poverty, homelessness, illness, physical abuse, addiction and violence.[6-7] The most significant family factors which are related to school achievement are the amount of family involvement with school and family attitudes and beliefs about schooling.[8-9] Under the above pretext, a study was carried out among under per forming high school students to explore the causes of academic failures.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the study was to identify the intellectual, personal, and psychosocial correlates of academic failures in high school students. The study aimed at understanding concerns of students about academic failures and exploring the possibility of it being categorized according to different areas.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

Participants included were 9th standard students who have failed in 3 or more subjects for the half yearly examination of the academic year 2013-14. Purposive Samples were collected from 3 types of schools: 5 students from private school, 5 from government school and 5 from government aided private school. The age of the sample was from 14- 17 years. Data about the percentage of failures in different schools were also collected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection. Individual case studies were done using interview, IQ using Standard Progressive Matrices (SPM) and NIMHANS battery for specific learning disability. Failed students were interviewed for separate 2 occasions and each session

extended for 30-45 mts. The contents of these interviews were reported in verbatim. Experiences about school and family environments were asked to the students. The students were also asked about the problems faced by them and the way they were treated by the friends, teachers, and the family after their failures in examinations. In addition Individual IQ assessments were done using Standard Progressive Matrices (SPM) and reading and writing skills were assessed using NIMHANS battery for specific learning disability. Responses of the students were analyzed using content analysis. The categories of coding procedures were formed as personal factors, family related factors and school related factors leading to academic failure.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Contents of the interviews were studied in detail and there were certain salient findings which puts light to various aspects of students' psychosocial factors leading to academic failure. Govt. School has much higher percentage of failures compared to other two types of schools. [I] Students are more likely to do well when there is a school culture which has an academic emphasis. [5] Study by Beck and Murphy also showed that the general school climate has a tremendous impact on how all the people in a building--teachers, students, and administrators--feel about being there. [9]

Reading and writing scores of the students tested using NIMHANS battery for specific learning disability were also analysed. [II] From the analysis, it is clear that the students from government school scored much lower in NIMHANS battery for specific learning disability. This shows the need to provide basic training in reading and writing skills to students in govt schools.

Contrary to popular belief, about 87% of students have average or above average IQ. [III]This raises a very important question to explore into other psychosocial factors which affect the academic performance of the students. [10]

The study shows that the identified correlates of the academic failures were parent's educational level, socioeconomic status of the family, adverse family environments, and father's alcoholism. [IV] Number of years of education of fathers is between 8.5 and 11.5, which is from 8th standard to plus two level. Similarly mothers also have lower number of years of education. In addition students with academic failures were from poor and lower middle class families and had economic constraints at home. This also affected their studies adversely. Similarly uncongenial familial environment, father's alcoholism, and family quarrels have high correlation in majority of the cases with academic failures. When asked to write about 3 major problems confronted by them, only 20% of students identified academic failures as a problem. 54% of students have identified alcoholic fathers and financial insecurity as the major problem in their lives. Some of the students broke into tears when the experiences with alcoholic fathers were described. One student stated that once her books were put on fire by her father when he was drunk and even beat her for stopping him from beating her mother. She described her father as scary figure. 66.66% of these students have conflicts in the family either between the parents, or among other family members or with their siblings. Another student has major conflicts with his brother and was a clear case of sibling rivalry. His brother blamed him as cause behind all the family problems. He is also from a very poor family, and goes to manual labour work to manage the household expenses. 20% students revealed that they smoke and uses alcohol occasionally with friends. Substance abuse of the students also can lead to academic failures.

Content analysis of the interviews further shows that in one case mental illness of the mother, alcoholism and poor socioeconomic status of the family affected the gifted child with grade I IQ. He never smiled during interviews and wore unclean uniforms. He was very reluctant to talk in the beginning of interviews and gradually improved as we build the rapport during interview. He was so frustrated and frozen that he couldn't even cry when he described the family problems. This case was an example for how a gifted child can be academically unsuccessful when combined with adverse school and family environments.

Similarly there were other bio psychosocial aspects identified leading to the academic failures among high school students. One student exhibited hyperactivity such as shaking the legs and arms constantly and interrupting the interviewer's speech. He stated that he gets punished almost every day for being disruptive in the class and so he does not come to the class often. This is in consistent with the research done by Deschenes which found that behavioral difficulties such as hyperactivity and attention deficit disorders may affect the academic performance of the students. [1]

The main factors leading to academic failures as revealed during the interviews were parent's educational level, socioeconomic status of the family, adverse family environments and quarrels, father's alcoholism and school atmosphere. Interestingly, majority of the students with academic failures had average or above average IQ.

Table I- Percentage of academic failures in different types of schools

Type of school	Percentage of academic failures
Govt	75
Govt aided	25
Private	15

Table II- Reading and Writing skills of students from various types of schools

Type of school	Average number of mistakes (reading)	% of marks in spelling test
Government	38	30
Private	4	75
Government aided	5	70

Table III- Number and percentage of students with various levels of IQ on SPM

IQ	Number of students	percentage of students
Grade I	1	6.66
Grade II-	4	26.66
Grade III+	4	26.66
Grade III-	4	26.66
Grade IV +	2	13.33

Table IV- Family correlates of students with academic failures (n=15)

	Government	Government aided	Private
Father's educational level	10.5 years	8.5 years	11.5years
Mother's educational level	8.5 years	12 years	14 years
Socioeconomic status Poor	60%	40%	0
Lower middle class	40%	60%	100%
Uncongenial family	80%	60	60%
Environment	20%	20%	0
Student's alcoholism			
Father's alcoholism	60%	60%	40%

CONCLUSION

Identifying the factors that interfere with academic success is the first step in the process of choosing interventions to address this issue. This study aimed at exploring the students with academic failures and has found the relevance of school climate and family atmosphere along with personal factors such as hyperactivity and substance use in academic failures.

Majority of the students with academic failures are found to have normal or above average IQ. Therefore, Individual counseling sessions for students with academic failures could be of help to overcome the barriers for academic success.

Conflicts of interest: Nil.

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