

The Outstanding Academic Success of Students from Underprivileged Families: Exploring the Inspirations, Community Culture and Challenging Situations

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore the outstanding and exceptional academic success of secondary and higher secondary school students from underprivileged families from the perspective of their inspiration, community culture, and the challenging situations they faced. The population of the study consisted of 174 top-position holders of secondary and higher secondary school students from underprivileged families in the Sahiwal division out of which twelve students were selected through purposive sampling. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews using a narrative ethnographic approach. After collecting and transcribing the data; codes, categories and themes were derived and results were presented thematically. Most of the participants were inspired 'internally' or 'externally', faced challenging situations successfully, and admired the supportive role of the community to achieve their success. The results will be helpful for government institutes, policymakers, donor agencies, student welfare organizations, and people who intend to work for the betterment of students.

Keywords: Academic success, Underprivileged families, Inspiration, Community culture, Challenging situations.

1. Introduction

Academic success may be considered as the level up to which the student has achieved the knowledge, efficiency, learning, and skills that the teacher wants to teach or assign (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2000). It is deemed one of the important theories in education that are designed to judge the completion of the final goal of a person's achievement and the outcome of an education system in the future (Jamali et al., 2013). Academic performance is a crucial component of academic success (York et al., 2015). It is the information gained by students and measured by the teachers in terms of marks and educational goals set by the students and teachers to be gained over a certain period. It can be scaled by continuous assessment or through examination results.

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Academic success has been divided into two parts in terms of the influencing factors; Student factors and teaching factors (Narad & Abdullah, 2016). Other than this, psychological factors also affect the academic achievement of the students excluding intellectual abilities (Mihaela, 2015).

Academic achievement is affected by so many components; some of them depend on the socioeconomic status of the country and the development index. Socioeconomic and demographic factors, institutional environment and other supporting factors, quality of teaching, motivational factors, curricular activities, social media relationship, sleeping time, and academic vision of the nation among other things have been identified by researchers all over the world as the framework of student's academic achievement (Alam & Khatun, 2021).

Miranda et al., (2007) found that "Students Success Skills" play an important role to achieve academic success: 1) Developing a kind, coordinated and inspiring study place. 2) Target management, progress judgment, and sharing of success stories. 3) Analytical and memory-related expertise. 4) Under stress performance, how to manage test worries. 5) Improvement of achievements using mental practice. 6) Development of healthy hopes. When these ideas, instruments, strategies, and tools are used in classrooms by the teachers then the students become more successful.

Great Lakes Center for Education and Practice (2009) has identified three main components of student success which include: 1) Provision of more access to education to the students during summer, for example, summer schools, visiting a museum, traveling, academic gatherings, and many more. 2) Make stronger nonacademic activities which are after-school programs like tutoring, watching television, games, and activities on the internet. 3) Students' registration in pre-school. This will bring a positive change in academic achievements, social skills, and achievement by means of school (Berliner, 2009).

Underprivileged people do not have the advantages of other people. They usually live in poverty. Many times, poor, unfortunate, deprived, disadvantaged, and underclass are the words used as synonyms for underprivileged. According to Rais (1995) & Hayati et al. (2020), poverty is a state of availability of sources related to basic needs like basic education, food, clothing, housing, and health care. Poverty is usually expressed as a shortfall of income to meet the basic needs of life. According to him, there are two types of poverty levels: 1) Absolute Poverty is a state, where the income level is not such to meet the basic needs of life. Simply, the people who do not earn two dollars are considered and measured in absolute poverty. 2) Relative poverty is the frequency of poverty which is based on the fraction of income spread in the area between different components of society. The government determines this level (Ali & Ali, 2018). During the year 2016, 24.3% of the population was poor as reported in National Poverty Report 2015-2016 (Pakistan, 2018). According to estimates updated by Iqbal (2020), 21.5 % of the population is living under the official poverty line, and urban and rural poverty incidences as estimated are 10.7 and 27.6 respectively (Jamal, 2019).

According to Sikander and Rizvi (2014), Poverty expresses a shortage of food and other requirements which are necessary for growth, development, and good health in a country. Most Pakistanis are middle-income people, and a significant part of the population is affected by the disease of poverty, which causes diseases like hunger and malnutrition in them. Three methods to measure poverty are: 1) Head Count Ratio which is a ratio of the population that is under the national or international poverty line. 2) Poverty gap ratio which is the measure of poverty obtained by multiplying the headcount by the average distance at which the poor are from the poverty line.

3) Severity of poverty measure. Here weight given to each poor person is relative to the square of the income loss of the poor from the poverty line.

According to Lacour and Tissington (2011), poverty has an important impact on the capital which students have. Due to a shortage of resources, many students try to achieve the same academic achievement levels as other students who are not poor. Income is one of the elements that affect student's achievement. Many low-income students perform badly in exams. Low achievement is directly linked to a lack of resources, and multiple studies have found a link between low socioeconomic status and low student achievement.

According to Kapinga (2014), most researchers have concluded that parents' low socioeconomic status is also one of the great factors in their children's low academic achievement. "Children from low-income families are more likely to face late developmental and learning problems than children from higher-income families."

In this study, the researchers aimed to explore insights into the academic achievements of the students of underprivileged families at the secondary and higher secondary level. This study will explore the factors which made their success possible and the role that their inspiration, community culture, and the challenging situation played while pursuing their studies and achieving top positions in the division. The study has implications for the education department, society, families, and especially students belonging to underprivileged families.

2. Research Questions

The researcher addresses the following questions.

1. How did the community culture of underprivileged families contribute to the academic success of secondary and higher secondary school students?
2. How were the secondary and higher secondary school students from underprivileged families motivated to achieve top positions in the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education?
3. How did the top position holder secondary and higher secondary school students face the challenging situations that helped them achieve success?

3. Methodology

A qualitative research design of a narrative ethnography approach was used by the researchers to study the success stories of secondary school and higher secondary school students belonging to underprivileged families and the role of their inspirations, community culture, and the challenging situations they faced during their studies. Narrative ethnography is a new way of studying stories and their true relationships with storytellers and experiences (Atkinson & Hammersesley, 1994). A life story interview is one of the better techniques for collecting in-depth data about the individual's life (Atkinson, 1998). Nevertheless, a semi-structured interview guide was used due to time limitations. This study mainly focused on factors that made their success possible. The ethical aspects of participants' confidentiality were considered through using pseudonyms and taking their consent prior to data collection. The participants were assured that the information will be used solely for the purpose of research and their identity will not be disclosed any way. Moreover, they were allowed to quit the study any time without prior permission from the researcher.

Statistical data for position holders were downloaded from the official website of the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISE) Sahiwal division, Sahiwal. A complete list of position holders was prepared for the last five years and validated with the booklet issued by the BISE Sahiwal for position holders, the public, and the media. Twelve Position holders were selected through purposive sampling for the interview that belonged to underprivileged families with their family income ranging from Rs.10000/- to Rs.20000/-. Such students were contacted personally and talked about the purpose of the study and requested to participate in a semi-structured interview. Approximately one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted in Urdu language. The interview guide was validated through the opinion of the experts in the field of qualitative research and through piloting on a sample of participants. The results of the study were member-checked for the purpose of validation. by Raw data first transcribed in to English, coded, categorized and lastly developed the themes. During data analysis, privacy was maintained to observe ethical considerations.

4. Results

After the careful transcription of the interview data, and analyzing the transcript thematically, the emergent themes include students' inspirations, community culture, and the challenging situations that the students faced. These themes are described in this section of the article.

Students' Inspirations

The word inspiration is derived from the Latin word *inspirare* means to breathe spirit, to inspire others or to be inspired means to infuse with life; to stimulate or impel some creative or effective effort; to give life or courage to; to cheer; to exhilarate. A primary objective for teachers is to inspire, encourage, stimulate and engage the students in such a way that they begin to generate their passion (Smith, 2008). Experts have categorized inspiration into two major categories of internal motivation and external motivation. According to psychologists, motivation should be studied in education because it is actively related to new learning skills, methods and behaviors, and the introduction of academic success is one of the first ways to define the such type of motivation (Mehndroo & Vandana, 2020).

All the participants of the study were inspired by someone else. A student of a government school who stood first among girls in humanities was inspired by a position holder girl of her village and school fellow and narrated that:

I was very much inspired by the girl living in my village and studying in the same school. On seeing her, I said to myself, I will also win the position but I could not succeed to win in SSC exams, however, I won the position in the intermediate examination. The position holder girl guided me in subject selection.

A position holder who had a great desire to be prominent among students and help her father after getting higher education like a son in his culture, living in a small and remote village remarked that when she was a seventh-class student, a teacher gave her an award on her academic success on calling her name to come on stage with remarks well done, keep it up, inspired her a lot. She wanted to help her father being an elder daughter like a son and it was only possible after getting an education and hard work. Once another teacher also said to her that "*she has a spark*".

Parents and other family members also remained a source of inspiration for students. For example, a cousin was inspired by being a local university student while his mother was very much

worried about his education. She died when he was an eighth-class student and the student was very much inspired by his cousin, a student at the University of Okara. One of his relatives was also a source of inspiration to him because he told him *“If you won the position in BISE, then there will be a chance to go abroad and settled down there. I liked him and was inspired by them”*. One thing that also inspired him a lot was the narrative of his late mother; he studied while others uneducated relatives living in the same locality say not at all.

A student, who always made his timetable according to prayer timings, was very much inspired by one of his classmates and always tried to get marks close to him. He was also inspired by one of his teachers and his teaching style. He followed his teaching pattern, way of his memorizing, and its applications to all other subjects. A student who secured the first position in BISE being the second division in SSC examination described that he was inspired by his elder brother who had already won the position in BISE and cash announced by the Chief Minister, Punjab. His elder brother wrote the amount of prize money on a chart and pasted it in front of his bed where he can see it every time. Another position holder was inspired by his good “naseeb” (Luck) and by so many successful people in the society living around his locality.

Being an average student up to class 10, a position holder decided to change his track from science to commerce, he succeeded due to his hard work, appreciation, and recognition and stated that:

When I could not excel in science by repeatedly listening to the teachers, I was an average student; I decided to change my track and I.Com. was my priority. All changed suddenly; hard work, appreciation, giving importance, and recognition inspired me a lot. Position holders' names on flexes on campus and prospectus pages were also a source of inspiration for me.

A position holder reflected that his father admitted him to an institute run by a religious welfare organization and advised him to work hard. He always remembered the golden words of his father that inspired him. A Hafiz-e- Quran and follower of religion in true spirit narrated as he was inspired by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and always followed his favorite religion of Muhammad (peace be upon him). He was also inspired by “Peer Sahib” (head of the religious institute) for his *faizan-e-nazar*. A position holder, a student of a government school, who got a position in SSC examination in the Arts group described that he was inspired by his teachers and headmaster. Another first-position holder in the science group stated that he was inspired by the goals which he had set for himself. There was no compromise below that he had been set as a target. Up till the achievement of the target, he remained upset. Another position holder remarked about his inspiration factor as, “Position in board and cash inspired me a lot”.

Challenging Situations

The participants of the study faced many challenging situations that motivated them or sometimes challenged them to succeed in their studies. It has become a challenge for one of the participants to win the position when her village fellow and a schoolmate stood third in the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISE). A student of a government girls’ school that stood first among girls in the humanities group stated that it was a challenge for her to win the position and also, and she could not do so in SSC examination. She described: *I was a tenth-class student when my school and village fellow girl got the third position in BISE. Now it was a challenge for me, and I accepted it. I selected the same subjects as she had, worked hard, prayed*

to Almighty Allah for success, and won this challenge.

According to the participants of the study, the economic conditions of the family were quite the worst and a big challenge was to fight against poverty and illiteracy in the family. It was only possible to overcome with the help of extraordinary success. A participant accepted the “challenge”, whatever the situation was; moved forward, and ultimately “succeeded to win the position”. Her mother was very much worried about her education but she died when he was in eighth class. She remarked that:

My mother wanted me to be an educated person and she kept on focusing on my studies. She said to all, I shall study while other relatives consistently say, no he will not study. It has become a challenging issue for me. Mother’s statement that “he will study” won when I won the position in BISE after two years of her death.

He was the elder among his three brothers and made his study schedule according to the prayer timings. Another participant remarked that once one of his teachers said to him, you will fail in at least four subjects in SSC examination. Again, when he was a student in F.Sc. part first, a teacher passed reflected that “*I did not know how much students get so good marks in exams,*” he accepted it as a challenge, worked very hard, and succeeded to win the first position in pre-medical group among boys in BISE Sahiwal. A participant who got the first position in BISE being second division in SSC examination described that:

I failed in Mathematics in class ninth annual examination while my elder brother had won a position in the BISE Sahiwal a year ago. One day, the mother of his fiancé came to my house and wished to marry her daughter to my elder brother. I decided to become a position holder like my brother. It was a big challenge for me. I worked hard, won the position and the situation changed.

A participant secured only 690 marks in SSC examination and none were happy with his poor performance. His Father admitted him to an institute run by a religious welfare organization. He narrated, “None was happy with my performance in the SSC exam”. His Father took him to the HSS-level institute for admission and advised him “about his next life roadmap”. He decided to study, “accepted this big challenge, worked hard, and succeeded”. Another participant who got a position in SSC examination in the Arts group described that “*I was living in a village with quite limited resources of income and basic facilities. I accepted this condition as a challenging situation to change, worked hard and succeeded*”.

An overall first position holder in the science group faced a quite different challenge set by him and he described that the challenging situation for him was to achieve his self-made goals. He kept on struggling until he succeeded. He was sure of his success but he was quite calm and humble. A member of an underprivileged family from a far-flung village described his success:

Life was full of challenges like poverty and illiteracy. Other than this, was the insulting behavior of the influential people of the village faced by his family being poor. It was a challenging situation. The only solution was hard work and excel. He succeeded after a long struggle

Community Culture

Students’ better educational results require collective and unified efforts on the part of the home, school, and community. It is noted that the combination of these agents is very important

for child's better socialization, enhancing the learning environment, improving learning effectiveness, and better academic output in studies (Tárraga et al., 2017). A student of a government school, who stood first among girls in the humanities group described the supportive role of community culture in her success:

Community culture remained supportive of me. None created any problem for me or my family. Different people have different values but most of them were supportive of me. Both types of attitudes, positive and negative were in the society, but both gave me a positive drive even though some of them reflected quite conservative thinking about girl education. The community was happy with my success and encouraged me.

A position holder living in a small and remote village did not have any issues related to the community culture. It always supported her even being a member of a very poor and illiterate family. She described that the community always supported her and did not create any hurdles in her studies. Every family has its values but it remains in between a supportive and non-supportive attitude. Community attitude matters a lot but it depends upon you how you take its effect. She was very sensitive in nature and indulged in the depression by listening to negative remarks of the community, but it took a short time to become normal. All were happy about her success despite the criticism in the family and community.

One of the participants' mother was very much worried about his education, but she died when he was an eighth-class student and he became quite alone and helpless. He reflected that *"community culture remained supportive to me. Values had both types of effects on me. However, the community's negative attitude gave me the drive to succeed and all were happy about my success."*

A Hafiz- e-Quran position holder liked to be isolated and adjusted his study hours according to the prayer timings and spent his life according to the teachings of Islam. He stated that he did not have any issues with community culture. It always supported him. If values are according to Islam, then it will certainly be good. He thought all will be according to the will of Allah Almighty. None of the negative attitudes affects him. All were happy about his success and congratulated him.

Another position holder lived in a remote village and was number two in descending order in his family. His father was a shopkeeper in the village and his earned money was used in the everyday life. He remarked that

Community cultures always remained supportive of me. No problem, no hurdle at all. Different people have different values that can never be changed. Traditions are similar to all Pakistanis and Muslims. Both types of attitudes in the community were quite common but they least bother me. All were happy about my success and appreciated me.

A first position holder in I.C.S. group wanted to become a well-off officer. He was also very much impressed by the golden saying of Hazrat Ali about "naseeb" (Luck) and the Prime minister of Pakistan's saying about "mind and matter". He described that *"community culture always supported me. I did not find any hurdles at all. Values and traditions also remained supportive. No effect of the community's negative attitude on me at all. Luck was important to me."*

One of the participants was an average student up to class tenth, so he decided to change his track from science to business because he was very much impressed by the business community

and well-dressed officers in Banks or other organizations. Many of his relatives were also doing successful business.

Another participant secured only 690 marks in SSC examination and none was happy with his poor performance. His Father admitted him to an institute run by a religious welfare organization and was very much worried about him. The student shared that community culture always supported him. He always followed the Islamic culture in his life. All were as per Almighty Allah's will.

He liked Islamic culture and always followed his community's culture, values and traditions were always in favor of him. He always expected a positive attitude and all were happy with his success. Another position holder remarked that "Negative attitudes were quite common, but I least bother it."

5. Findings and Discussion

All of the participants were inspired and motivated internally or externally. One of the position holders was motivated internally by fixing targets for himself and struggled to achieve them. The external motivation was also very much common in observing the successful and inspiring people in the community. Inspiration either it is intrinsic or extrinsic affects the students. Most of the students were affected extrinsically while few of them were affected intrinsically. As described by Maruyama (2003), the motivational factors which played a role to an impoverished child's success could be individual motivation, family involvement, and school and community support systems. Some students came into this world with a natural drive or passion for success (Niehaus et al., 2012).

The challenging situation also played an important role in the success of the position holders. On accepting the challenges, students decided to fight to meet these challenges. They took it as a priority like a position on the board, and marriage with the girl, and won the position when others commented, "no he will not study, do not waste money on his education. Purchase some cattle for earning for tomorrow." One of the position holders accepted the situation as a challenge when the local landlord insulted his father on his doorstep for not reaching the *beggar*. He decided to come out of this situation at any cost. Challenging situations played a vital role in the success of most students. They argued in the challenging situation, it became essential for them to secure their success while few of them were of the view that they fought for their success due to the challenges.

Community culture always remained supportive of the position holders. Both types of community attitudes (positive and negative) gave drive to the students. All were happy on their success. All congratulated them; some of them gave the position holders hard cash as a prize. They believed in their success in achieving good marks in the first year, and after the final examination, on receiving the phone call from BISE Sahiwal about their first, second or third position. As concluded by Whitbeck et al. (2001), traditional culture has a positive effect on the academic success of children. In a study conducted by Bliss & Sandiford (2004), it was found that student culture rather than institutional culture determines students' behaviors. Also found by Brüggeman (2014), the concept of educational success leads to cultural detachment was challenged by Romani students.

6. Conclusion

All the participants were inspired by factors like school fellows, teachers, headmasters, relatives, successful people in society, father's piece of advice, the head of a religious school, and

prominent persons in society. The study participants had faced challenging situations and most of them struggled in such situations. Community culture remained supportive of all the position holders with a little bit problematic attitude toward society, especially in the case of girl education. On achieving success all of society congratulated them with open arms and appreciated them. The study had implications for the school education department, policymakers, community, teachers, parents, and students.

Most of the students faced challenging situations like illiteracy, poverty, and insult and they accepted it and worked hard for success to come out of this situation. Students should be given training by the teachers on how to handle such situations if faced. Society's negative attitude became sometimes problematic and disturbing for the students. The benefits of a positive attitude from a medical and religious point of view should be highlighted by psychiatrists, scholars, religious leaders, teachers, and the media. This research can also be conducted in different communities, marginalized groups, different demographic conditions, and public and private schools among male and female position holders.

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