

Achievement Motivation: A Comparative Study between Bright Learners and Slow Learners in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating the achievement motivation of two categories of students of Psychology at the undergraduate level: bright students (fast learners) and slow learners in relation to the learning strategies employed by them. It is an empirical research with learner motivation assessed post intervention. The intervention was in the form of encouraging the learners to employ the best suited learning strategy for better performance. The study found the former group excelling and the latter group sagging in efforts/achievements – either failing or scoring poorly in studies. We conclude that this situation is mainly the outcome of good or poor achievement motivation level, operating differently with different students, due to personality differences (intrinsic) and environmental factors (such as learning strategies and ‘interest’). The study also presents the motivating factors behind the excellence of bright learners with the aim to assist the poor learners improve their performance. Data for this study was collected using a questionnaire with the Psychology learners (undergrad level), an interview with teachers and student counseling for collection of post intervention data. The study concludes with constructive recommendations and suggestions.

Keywords: Motivation, Needs, Behaviour, Globalisation, Learning strategies, Competencies

INTRODUCTION

According to Schiffman (2007), motivation is a psychological force; it is the driving force within individuals. This driving force impels the individuals to action. Again, this driving force in the individuals is the result of a state of tension due to unfulfilled underlying need. He adds that individuals strive hard – sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously – mostly simultaneously – to reduce the tension produced by the need or needs. This tension is either reduced or eliminated through appropriate behaviour with anticipation that the need or needs would thereby be fulfilled. This behaviour is not uniform in its approach, thought and learning in all individuals because all individuals are different in their personality make-up. Their thinking processes (cognition) and previous learning (experience) come to play in deciding actions.

In view of the foregoing, ‘needs’ are at the base of behaviour and action and fulfillment of those needs becomes then obviously the goal, and it is spontaneous and subtle many a time. Some individuals, students being no exception, aspire to get results and drive their energies hopefully and with confidence; there is no or near no chance of failure on their part. Even if they fail, they do not give up because the need of succeeding is very strong. But, on the other hand, there are individuals, students included, who lack self-confidence and have poor self-image, and want to take a safe course; they cannot digest failure of their attempt, and, therefore, aim low to avoid embarrassment. There is no or little challenge in their goals. This leads us to claim that motivation is not at the same level in all individuals; each individual is unique. Therefore, the truth that emerges now is that there is positive motivation in some cases and there is negative motivation in other cases. It depends upon family background,

environment, various kinds of support forthcoming or not being available and past record of successes (experiences) that act as strong or weak driving force in the individuals concerned – and in vastly varying degrees many time; and, of course, in different settings or contexts.

CURRENT LITERATURE

Pokay and Blumenfield (1990) examined the relation among motivation, learning strategy use and achievement. This was a study of high school students that employed Path analysis to determine the effects of motivation (ability perceptions, expectancies, and perceived value) and use of learning strategies (metacognitive, general cognitive, geometry specific, and effort) on achievement early and late in the semester.

Pintrich (1999) in a study on the role of motivation in promoting and sustaining self regulated learning presents a general framework to help understand the relationship between motivation and self-regulated learning. According to the framework, self-regulated learning can be facilitated by the adoption of mastery and relative ability goals and hindered by the adoption of extrinsic goals. In addition, positive self-efficacy and task value beliefs can promote self-regulated behavior. Self-regulated learning is defined as the strategies that students use to regulate their cognition (i.e., use of various cognitive and metacognitive strategies) as well as the use of resource management strategies that students use to control their learning.

Studying Middle school students' motivation and quality of experience Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi (2005) compared the motivation and quality of experience of demographically matched students from Montessori and traditional middle school programs. Approximately 290 students responded to the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) and filled out questionnaires. Multivariate analyses showed that the Montessori students reported greater affect, potency (i.e., feeling energetic), intrinsic motivation, flow experience, and undivided interest (i.e., the combination of high intrinsic motivation and high salience or importance) while engaged in academic activities at school. The traditional middle school students reported higher salience while doing academic work; however, such responses were often accompanied by low intrinsic motivation. When engaged in informal, non-academic activities, the students in both school contexts reported similar experiences. These results are discussed in terms of current thought on motivation in education and middle school reform.

On the role of parents, in a very significant review for the developing countries, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) found a positive link between parental involvement and indicators of student achievement, including teacher ratings of student competence, student grades, and achievement test scores. Further, Involvement has also been associated with other indicators of school success, including lower rates of retention in grade, lower drop-out rates, higher on-time high school graduation rates, and higher rates of participation in advanced courses. In addition to these outcomes, parental involvement has also been linked to psychological processes and attributes that support student achievement. This involvement may be construed as home-based behaviors (e.g., helping with homework), school-based activities (e.g., attending school events), or parent-teacher communication (e.g., talking with the teacher about homework).

Teach Thought Staff (2012) lists 21 simple ways to improve student motivation. They are:

1. Give students a sense of control;
2. Define the objectives;
3. Create a threat-free environment;
4. Change your scenery;
5. Offer varied experiences;
6. Use positive competition;
7. Offer rewards;
8. Give students responsibility;
9. Allow students to work together;
10. Give praise when earned;
11. Encourage self-reflection;
12. Be excited;
13. Know your students;
14. Harness students' interests;
15. Help

students find intrinsic motivation; 16. Manage students' anxiety; 17. Make goals high but attainable; 18. Give feedback and offer chances to improve; 19. Track Progress; 20. Make things fun; 21. Provide opportunities for success.

Thomas Toch and Susan Headen (2014) have suggested simple ways to motivate students to work harder. These are: (i) Students could be buttressed psychologically to tackle academic challenges; (ii) When students feel 'dumb', the solution is not to tell them they are 'smart' but to make them feel as though being 'smart' or 'dumb' is irrelevant to success; (iii) Unless students are persuaded that they are up to the challenge, the common core could leave many students even further behind'.

Offering concrete solution, Guertin (2015) says "Individual advising is essential to the success of our students and their preparation to address the meta-challenges of their generation. Advisers who are trained to help students explore options and analyse their interests, who teach students to be intentional in selecting courses and enrichment opportunities, who help students integrate and balance the breadth provided by general education with the depth and specialization of the major, and who guide students in creating a coherent plan individually tailored to prepare them to achieve their long-term goals are fundamental to delivering a high-quality education. Training students to think critically, to analyse objectively, to research and investigate, to communicate effectively, and to be tolerant, innovative, and creative is an enduring benefit higher education can provide. The breadth and depth provided by the current structure of the baccalaureate degree serves our students well, but only when we help them approach the degree as a flexible structure that must be intentionally shaped to prepare them to achieve long-term goals—goals that should go far beyond an initial job or career aspiration."

Promoting the role of Academic Advising which is also prevalent in some universities in the Arab region, Egan (2015) says that students can perform better if "In conjunction with advising syllabi, implementing e-portfolios can effectively encourage students to undertake consistent self-reflection. E-portfolios also provide a means for advisers to monitor the progress of students, and they allow for both virtual collaboration and preparation for in-person meetings. They also have the added benefit of encouraging and cataloguing integrative learning through reflection; students are able to actively reflect on curricular and co-curricular achievements and how they dovetail with one another. Using these tools can be beneficial when it comes to general education because they can help transform a disengaged student—one who is struggling to check off courses on a requirements list—into an engaged student taking ownership of his or her education and making informed and intentional choices about general education."

The popular Planet Presentation titled 'How to motivate your students' gives a rich repertoire of 21 simple ideas to improve student motivation. However, the main ideas relevant to the current study are: (i) there may be the best of lessons, books and other materials available in the college. But those things will not make students excited about learning and thus willing to work hard; (ii) There is no substitute for motivation; it is both intrinsic and extrinsic, and it is a key factor in the success of students at all stages of their education; (iii) Teachers can play a pivotal role in providing and encouraging that motivation in the students; (iv) Even the most well intentioned and educated teachers sometimes lack the skills to keep the kids on track; they need to encourage their students to live up to their true potential.

Back bench learners are known to be the poorly motivated lot. Ken (<http://tinyurl.com/28X4r5o>) has given ten rules for motivating the learners on the back row in his blog. Having conducted his studies in Europe, Ukraine and China, Ken has framed ten rules for motivating the boys on the back row. These are as under:

1. Deploy your big guns (invite top one third students to get their help in teaching class); 2. Engineer threesomes (make groups of three); 3. Get down on your knees (Teacher to walk around to facilitate group work); 4. Engage (Do A, B, C analysis in the book prescribed. Choose 10-12 topics that are somewhat known to students to create their interest. Move to B category topics and finally to C category topics); 5. Devolve responsibility (autonomy works better); 6. Face the facts: stop sitting in rows (Change the sitting arrangement. This gives freshness and removes the dullness); 7. Play to their strengths (Choose a student who has not spoken anything in the class and bring him/her to the stage. See the result. The student will pluck up courage and say a lot); 8. Keep it simple, keep it short (Make class do more work. You speak less or limited); 9. Avoid teaching grammar (It is boring to teach grammar rules. Read grammar explanations in your own language. It will work better); 10. Have a bit of Fun (Use stuff that makes students move around laughing, making lot of noise. This sets the tone for serious work).

PRESENT STUDY

The present study is an effort to find out the motivating drives or needs in those students who excel in their studies and join the exclusive club of bright students by dint of their high level performance. The study is also an attempt to investigate the motivation level of low performing college students classified as 'slow learners'. This investigation compares the two groups – bright students (fast learners) and slow learners (or laggards) with the following objectives in view.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To assess the motivation level of both bright as well as slow learners;
2. To find out the extent of individual differences between these two categories of students;
3. To find out the difference in achievement motivation in relation to the students' awareness of the learning strategies best suited to individual learning.
4. To apply the results of 1, 2, and 3 to motivate the poor learners to improve their performance.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study also aims at finding out answers to the following questions:

1. What is the level of achievement motivation of bright students?
2. What is the level of achievement motivation of slow learners?
3. Which factors are responsible for high achievement of bright students in their studies?
4. Absence or inadequacy of which factors are responsible for low-level achievement of slow learners in their studies?

METHODOLOGY

The data/information was gathered using a specially designed questionnaire aimed at self-assessment of motivation level of the learners at the beginning of the semester (on a scale of

1-5, where 1 denotes poor motivation and 5 denotes high motivation). This was correlated to their grades in the internal exams. Immediately thereafter they were offered counselling to improve their interest and help the poorly motivated learners to focus on better learning strategies. At the end of the semester, motivation level was again assessed using the same questionnaire and also correlated to the end semester exam results. A total of 120 students of psychology from two colleges were observed for the study. Eight teachers (four from each college) of the same set of students were administered a personal interview.

FINDINGS

Responses of eight TEACHERS of four colleges obtained during individual interviews were as under:

About Bright Students

- (a) Six (75%) teachers stated that there are no modern tools and infrastructure in colleges. LCD Projector is provided but it is installed in Seminar Hall, not used for taking classes. Two teachers (25%) stated that modern tools and infrastructure are in place but not regularly used. Chalk and talk age-old method is used by all teachers.
- (b) All the eight teachers (100%) admitted that there is no proper Personality Development Programme. Only sporadic guest/special lectures are organized.
- (c) All the teachers stated that the bright students take active part in student activities. They take part in debates, declamation contests and organize events. They ask questions in the class and do not shy away from inter-personal interactions. They are confident and aspire to do something great in life. They display characteristics of being filled with achievement motivation.
- (d) The bright students use library to good extent and use Internet liberally to keep updated. They spend 3 to 4 hours daily revising their lessons and come prepared to the classes. They ask questions politely and teachers attend to their queries immediately.

Responses of eight teachers of four colleges obtained during individual interviews:

About Slow Learners (measured by marks obtained in last examination)

- (a) The teachers were almost unanimous in stating that the slow learners lack confidence, studying only to get degrees.
- (b) They are shy and do not take part in student-related activities. They remain unparticipative in classes and do not respond despite prodding.
- (c) The slow learners do not study hard or hardly write their home assignments. They have no aspirations and consider studies/course as a burden, not pleasure. They do not display any enthusiasm and zeal in studies.
- (d) Teachers are ready to help them but they do not come forward. They frequently absent themselves from the classes.

Correlation of learners' examination performance with their self-assessment on the Motivation Scale of 1-5

The correlation coefficient of the internal examination score of the bright students at the beginning of the semester with their response on a 'Motivation Scale' of 1-5 was between 0.6 and 1.0 for 83 students. This goes to prove the efficacy of the questionnaire as it shows that

learners who rated their motivation level on the higher side (3 or more) also fared well in their internal examinations. This was the pre intervention reading. Similarly, 37 students achieved a poor correlation with the coefficient ranging below 0.4. Thus, the methodology stands validated.

Immediately after the first round of collection of data, the poor learners were individually counseled for 40 minutes each on two occasions. The sessions included a brief talk on learning strategies they could employ for better performance, an overview of the careers that lay open to them if they did well at academics and a three minute elicited talk by them on their strengths. They were also encouraged to talk to their 'mentor teacher', the researcher in this case for guidance during the semester.

At the end of the semester, the exam scores of both the sets of learners, viz. Alpha (for good learners) and Beta (for poor learners) were isolated to check the outcome of intervention. They were again administered the questionnaire to establish the correlation. The coefficients found were as follows:

Alpha group: Showed concentration around the same scores as pre intervention, viz. 0.6-1.0

Beta group: Showed drastic improvement in score correlations at 0.7-0.4. This shows that the researcher's intervention proved to be a useful tool in improving the motivation level of the poor learners. It may also be pointed out here that individual mentoring during the semester was also availed of by 32 out of 37 poor learners.

These findings prove that favourable factors that motivated bright students were:

- (i) projection of better image of self and bringing credit to family in community;
- (ii) better understanding ;
- (iii) securing lucrative job thus more income;
- (iv) higher competency of doing work/business;
- (v) respect from juniors,
- (vi) appreciation from teachers and relatives,
- (vii) higher morale, feeling of achievement,
- (viii) better self-image and model to others.

These factors functioned as drivers for better performance in studies.

It was found that the bright students got guidance from teachers when approached. The other kinds of

support resources were: (i) self-study for 3-4 hours daily; (ii) self-confidence as driving force; (iii) using Internet – edu channels; (iv) using library. They learnt the lesson that 'hard work pays'.

One sad outcome of the study was the discovery that the teachers discriminated in respect of giving guidance to students. They are stated to have attended to queries of bright students with pleasure, and almost wryly ignored the weak or slow learners.

Learners, especially the poor learners found the classroom environment boring and monotonous with the teaching fraternity resorting only to the 'chalk and talk' methodology. It came to light that modern tools and equipments are not either provided or not used in classroom teaching. Only charts/maps and few films are used for teaching as aids. Smart class

rooms and new approach to teaching/learning with audio-visual effect are the most facilitating devices and these make teaching and learning interesting and easy. They help in creating real life situations in the class rooms.

Extra-curricular activities are held at the colleges but one fourth of students avoid taking part in those activities as they are unmotivated. There is general tendency to involve same students in those activities because of handling them with ease and the aim appears to be not education but just fulfilling targets as per academic calendar.

One of the outcomes of the study is that lack of confidence, shyness, poor English language to express themselves in a mixed group of learners, and resort to rote to pass, low level of aspiration and indifferent attitude of teachers are the causes that make many students as slow learners.

It can be concluded that all the causes and factors mentioned above play their demotivating role to keep low motivation in the slow learners. They have developed negative attitude towards studies, more particularly in bringing about improvement of their performance as they feel satisfied being slow learners; they have low self-image and feel inferior.

On the other hand, the bright students perform better, make self-study at home, teachers encourage them; they have aspirations and desire to conquer the world, earn more and make their mark in society. They keep trying more and devise their own methods to grasp the content.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Academic mentoring at an individual level can ensure better motivation among the poor learners. The mentors can take the learners' feedback on a weekly basis to begin with and offer constructive guidance and motivation to them.

Regular workshops should be arranged to help the parents and teachers work in consonance for the learners' welfare. Group work may be encouraged in the classrooms, instead of giving individual assignments. Each group of 5-6 should have one or two bright students. This will help slow learners understand better and the latter will open up in the peer group easily because teacher will remain absent. Learning through project work may be encouraged to give a fair chance to the poor learners to be assimilated into the learning process. This will help them shed their shyness and build self-confidence.

Class room may be made smart and interesting by providing and using smart boards, audio-visual aids, films, pre-recorded cassettes, charts and maps, etc.

Teachers must be trained to be able to handle poor learners and involving whole class in the discussions including paper reading, presentations, debating and participating in declamation contests.

Personality Development Programmes may be arranged to improve the learners' soft skills which, in turn, will boost their self-image and confidence.

Prejudice against poor learners will have to be removed by giving psychological inputs by expert teachers and depicting the emerging global environment for their appreciation of the reality where learning can be the key to success, and hence, a better lifestyle.

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