

Perspectives of Academically Successful Male Malaysian Students on Their Success

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Abstract: Boys' academic underachievement has long been discussed in the scholarly literature. Several important questions in this regard are: Why are there successful boys as well as unsuccessful boys? What are the characteristics and qualities of academically successful boys? What factors contribute to the success of these boys? This study investigates the perceptions of ten Malaysian boys who have been selected as academically successful by their teachers as compared to their schoolmates in secondary school. The main objective of the study was to examine the factors which contributed to the academic excellence of these successful boys. Ten boys in Form 5 participated in the study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analysed for emerging themes. The findings indicated that the participants attributed their academic success to five factors: 1) the use of school and teachers as positive resources; 2) the advantageous personality characteristics of themselves as learners; 3) their positive attitudes toward literacy; 4) Their constructive coping strategies and the motivating factors present at school; and 5) support from parents, teachers and peers. The findings suggest several educational implications, including for teacher training and parent education

Key words: Successful boys • Academic achievement • Underachievement • Coping strategies • Gender differences.

INTRODUCTION

For several years in Malaysia, as in other countries, considerable attention had been given to gender imbalance in academic achievement, where a range of educational indices have shown that boys are emerging as underachievers. In the secondary-school examinations in the public school system (SPM), girls outperformed boys in almost all the subjects, both science and non-science. As a result, the number of students entering university is now reported to be at a ratio of 65-35 (65% girls and 35% boys). The Malaysian government specifies the need to achieve equity and equality in the national education philosophy [1]. Gender differences in examination results is a significant factor to consider. Addressing male underachievement is of paramount importance to the development of human capital and future employment opportunities and benchmarks [2]. Nevertheless, there are indeed successful boys who can be models of success. What are the factors that contribute to their

academic achievement? The scholarly literature on the subject points to several factors at school and at home, as well as personality characteristics present in successful male learners. Teachers play an important role in bringing out the best potential in children, as argued by Kungjufu [3], who notes the importance of highly qualified teachers or what he calls 'master teachers', who teach and bond with students before even opening textbooks. Effective teachers motivate students and facilitate their learning as well as engaging with and empowering them.

Family culture and parental involvement affect learning and literacy, as stated by Gadsden [4]. The family is the first and main teacher of children and the home is the child's first and primary literacy resource [4] as a result, there is an urgent need for more involvement of parents and other family members in children's literacy development. Learning strategies and performance in literacy differ significantly between boys and girls, with the latter achieving higher scores in reading and writing [5].

Furthermore, parents can serve as academic role models for their children by interacting with them in terms of their academic progress [6]. Parents who value academic success may influence their children to aspire academically, develop high academic aspirations and maintain a more positive attitude toward school [6]. Achievement in the classroom has been linked to a plethora of other factors, including instructional environment [7] student effort and innate ability [8] and teacher expectations and attitudes [9].

The main objective of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the emergence of successful male learners who persevere and excel academically. The study can increase our understanding of the roles schools and the home play in enhancing boys' interests in learning and will recommend specific strategies to promote, motivate, encourage and reinforce the ability of more boys to perform better in school.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: The participants in this study were ten secondary-school boys who were academically excellent as verified by their examination grades obtained from Form Three examinations (equivalent to Year Nine in the United Kingdom and Tenth Grade in the United States) as well as from end-of-semester exams in Form Five. They were in the top 5% of the school population academically and obtained straight A's in all the school subjects in which they were examined. After receiving permission from the school principal 15 student nominations were received and an interview was scheduled with each of the nominating teachers to discuss the students. The parents of the nominated students were contacted and informed of the study. Twelve consent letters were returned and ten students were selected. Permission was obtained from the school and parents to conduct the interviews, review student records and when agreeable to the participant, tape-record the interviews.

Interviews: Interviews were conducted to obtain information from the students concerning their perceptions of the factors that contribute to academic excellence. Interviews can explain how successful boys negotiate school life, persevere and use their advanced literacy abilities in their school experiences [10, 11]. The research instrument consisted of an interview schedule composed of several questions revolving around factors contributing to success. The questions cover the students' perceptions of the home and school

environments. Before the face-to-face interview, each participant was given the interview questions to preview. The 45-minute interviews were audio taped and transcribed and were followed by an immediate write-up.

Data Analysis: The data were analysed based on the responses provided by students during the interviews. Each transcript was coded for major themes and patterns in the data. Questions guiding the analysis included: 1) What were the major themes in the data, as defined by recurring phrases or words and 2) what were the specific quotes that confirmed or disconfirmed the findings regarding the major themes and patterns in the data?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data from the interviews revealed five main themes with regard to successful students' perceptions of their success factors in school, indicated with the following labels: 1) School and Teachers as Resources; 2) Self-Perspectives; 3) Positive Attitude towards Literacy; 4) Coping Strategies and Motivating Factors in School; and 5) Support from Mentors and Allies.

Theme One

School and Teachers as Resources: It is seen that all the boys shared a common belief that school prepares one for success in life. When asked what they liked about school, students indicated they appreciated teachers' faith in them as learners. Teachers communicate high, positive expectations and encourage these male students to succeed. Teachers thus motivated these boys to learn and provided nurturance and guidance. Teachers showed genuine concern about boys' performance and gave the scaffolding needed to allow them to develop [12]. Among the responses fitting this theme were: 'Teachers are friendly and cooperative'; 'I am attached to this school'; 'Teachers are dedicated and hardworking'; 'The teachers involved also were strict but at the same time understanding'; and 'Respect between teachers and students'. The boys also reported that there was a good relationship between them and their teachers, as indicated by comments such as: 'Positive relationship with the teachers'; 'Teachers are good listeners'; 'My teachers give feedback constructively'; and 'Teachers do not discriminate between boys' and girls'. Regarding positive influences on learning, the boys responded thus: 'The confidence given to me by my teachers'; 'Teachers help and do not belittle me'; 'I learn from past mistakes'; and 'Good guidance from my teachers'.

The students also reported that the school atmosphere motivated them and the teaching and learning climate was positive and responsive. Among the responses in this category are: 'The school principal always encourages us'; 'He is friendly and caring'; 'The classroom climate is conducive [to learning] although discipline is maintained'; 'The school has a good image; everyone knows that the teachers are hardworking'; 'There is harmony and cooperation at all levels in school'; and 'Even the school gardener and canteen operator greeted me'. Guidance and nurturance from significant figures such as teachers paved the way for success. It can be concluded that school is a motivating factor in these students' lives and is very rewarding. Teachers are perceived as helpful and the harmonious relationship between them and students stimulates learning.

Theme Two

Self-Perspectives: The findings show that the boys agreed that working hard is essential to success and listed characteristics of successful learners such as perseverance, honesty, open-mindedness, willingness to learn and self-respect. Among the responses were 'Being consistent, dedicated and never giving up'; 'Failure should never be a hindrance in trying to achieve good grades'; 'There are students who become disappointed and refuse to accept the challenges of learning'; 'Enjoy learning; and it must come from within and from the heart'; 'A happy heart leads to an accepting mind'; 'One should receive responsibility with sincerity'; 'One must have good intentions in learning'; 'One must learn deeply to understand the concepts clearly'; 'Learning with sincerity means learning to understand fully what one does not know or hardly knows'; 'Adjusts to changes easily'; 'One must be adaptable. If there is no reference in the text, one can search information on websites'; 'Do not do last-minute revisions'; 'Cramming every detail up to the last minute before the exam is not advisable'; 'I have seen some boys staying up late near the exam'; and 'A successful learner must have a vision and anticipate what lies ahead. I know what to expect, what lies ahead'.

It can be concluded that academic excellence is dependent on many personality factors, such as self-determination, forward-lookingness, adaptability, independence, self-regulation, emotional stability, a psychological feeling of safety and persistence. Besides these traits, these boys are also intelligent and demonstrate good time-management skills [13].

Theme Three

Positive Attitude Towards Literacy: The interviews indicated that the participants have positive attitudes towards the importance of literacy, which includes both reading and writing. The findings suggest that time was allocated by these boys to reading and efforts made to increase the quality of their written work. Among the responses in this category are: 'Reading is the gateway to success'; 'I read often, not just the textbooks for review but also other books'; '[Reading] comes naturally to me'; 'I read to understand more deeply'; 'More and more reading clarifies the issue'; 'Every night I read'; 'Yes, I enjoy reading both the textbooks and newspapers'; '[I've] got numerous books at home'; 'Reading makes the man'; 'I read novels and scientific fiction'; and '[I] have a high reading proficiency, so I read books from the bookstore, such as Malaysian Publishing House (MPH). I also like to read autobiographies such as on Mahathir Mohammed, Nelson Mandela, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi'.

Students were also asked about their interest in writing and writing activities. Among the responses were: 'I write as often as I can'; 'I write compositions pertaining to school homework. Thus, I write quite often—on a daily basis'; 'I do creative writing once a week'; 'In my diary [are] my hopes, my wishes and expectations'; '[I write] homework or projects after visiting places such as the museum'; '[I write] to-do lists'; '[I write] strategies on improving my grades'; and 'I write my assignments based upon the texts recommended and additional readings'.

It can be concluded that participants undoubtedly read enthusiastically and write of their own free will. However, the participants differed in the amount and type of extra reading materials they read, with different students stating that they read, for example, newspapers, biographies and fiction. They felt that reading is the bridge to knowledge and great readers can increase their knowledge tremendously. As for writing ability and interest, the participants agreed that writing ability had paved the way to their academic success and increased their self-confidence. In an exam-oriented education system such as that in Malaysia, writing complements reading and it is no surprise that academically successful boys enjoy writing.

Theme Four

Coping Strategies and Motivating Factors in School: The participants were asked about their coping strategies and motivating factors in school. They mentioned positive peer relationships, high teacher expectations and

the leadership roles they hold. Peer tutoring and cooperative learning were quite popular and many of these students acted as mentors to other students who were performing less well. This tutoring reinforced their own learning. Among the responses were: '[My friends and I] met to discuss any problems in our studies'; 'We are good buddies; we share notes'; 'My friends [and I] discussed the assignment together'; and 'If I am not clear about something, I ask my friends'. Among the coping strategies mentioned are ignoring unpleasant boys who did not support them, for example, 'I ignore those who are bullying and sarcastic'; 'I avoid noisy and rowdy boys'; '[I] ignore bullies who hate or seem to ignore bright students'; 'I do not choose to quarrel; I try to avoid misunderstandings'; 'Do not let others give you stress'; 'I look at the brighter side of things'; and 'I tell myself I am bright and intelligent'.

The boys were also asked about their leadership roles at school. Among the responses were: 'Prefect for the school', 'Monitor of the class', 'Secretary of the Entrepreneurship Club and representative of the school in soccer', 'President of the debating society' and 'Secretary of the Science Club'. The boys were also asked about the obstacles to success. Among the responses were: 'Easily giving up when your grades are below average', 'I remember I scored lower than I expected but I picked up the pieces and enlisted the teachers' help'; 'I do not compare myself to others too much'; 'Do not mix with the wrong company'; 'Do not procrastinate'; and 'Being depressed too long and unwilling to share the depressed feelings [is not a good idea]'.

It can be concluded that academically successful boys have the knowledge and skills to cope with challenges in the learning environment. They weigh situations and modify their behaviour to tackle any unpleasant situation. They hold leadership roles, which make them more responsible and trusted. They are looked upon as protectors and role models. As role models, the participants show that one can be successful if one is willing to change to be a better student. They have been able to face the challenge offer of rejection for being too smart and appearing feminine and bookish and have managed to cope with negative peer behaviours.

Theme Five

Support from Mentors and Allies: The findings of the study revealed that these boys rely on several mentor-and ally-figures, including fathers, mothers, teachers and peers. The participants shared stories of how their parents

and relatives supported their studies consistently and constructively: 'My father encourages me to succeed'; 'My mother, although a single parent, is my main inspiration'; 'My dad supports me in every way'; 'My grandmother, since my mother died; my teachers and friends'; 'My parents, who are loving and concerned. Teachers and peers too played an important role as facilitators of learning. 'My teachers understand my learning needs'; 'My teachers guided me to answer exam questions'; and 'My peers inspire me to submit quality work'.

It can be concluded that parents, teachers and peers play a significant role as motivators of learning. They give support and direction. Parents supervise these boys' work daily, ensure that they receive extra tutoring and are there to help them in case they have personal or academic problems. The study also revealed that the participants' teachers are good mentors who give constructive feedback and monitor the boys' work [14]. These three groups—teachers, parents/relatives and peers are the ultimate source of inspiration to these successful learners. Parent-education and involvement programs in schools should develop the roles of parents as educators, whether for academically advanced students in two-parent families, for those in single-parent families, or for non-excelling male students at risk. Parents should be recognised as partners in learning. Topics for parents should include ways to enhance the self-esteem of boys from preschool to the later stages of adolescence. Peer pressure and the constructive and destructive roles of peers should be scrutinised with care to make sure that peers play positive roles in their friends' lives. Cooperative learning activities should be instituted to spur the burgeoning of innovative teaching practices. School guidance counsellors and learning clubs should support male students learning how to cope with the fierce competition from girls who excel at higher rates than boys. Parent-teacher cooperation can help support and sustain the progress of boys, helping them emotionally, socially, economically and academically.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrated some of the dynamics in the school and home that contribute to the academic success of some boys. These factors relate to different aspects of the school and home environment, which involves the attitudes of significant individual such as parents, family members and peers. The school

atmosphere and teaching and learning climate should be assessed regularly to ensure a more fruitful learning atmosphere. The diagnosis of boys' level and status as learners should be on-going from the formative to the summative stage to address the problems they might face as male learners. As discussed above, the positive indicators derived from this study have significant implications on possible innovation in the teaching and learning environment for the enhancement of the academic achievement of male students. The issue of male underachievement is universal and multicultural and research from other cultures should be added to studies such as the present one to help develop policy and practices conducive to strong academic achievement in boys in all societies.

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