

***Relationship between Behavior and College Students’
Academic Performance: The Case of the National Institute
of Transport in Tanzania***

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Abstract

This paper attempts to shed light on the extent of the influence of students’ behaviors to their learning initiatives. The study aimed at exploring strategies that may assist college students to invest full concentration in their studies in an effort to improve their academic performance. The target population included students at the National Institute of Transport in Dar es Salaam. Qualitative data was analyzed by using content analysis and quantitative data was analyzed by using descriptive statistics. The first phase involved a distribution of structured questionnaires to the selected respondents. In this phase, the researchers explored responses with the aim of identifying the level of students’ perceptions on the influence of their behavior on their academic performance at the college. In the second phase the researchers conducted three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with selected respondents. This aimed at developing deeper understanding of behavioral and environmental factors influencing students’ academic performance both within the college and beyond. The findings revealed that, majority of the students spent much of their time thinking and engaging themselves in activities that would sustain their daily needs, thus distorting the level of concentration in their studies. Moreover, stress levels in most of the respondents were significant and required immediate rescue plan by the college. The findings for this study also identified the need for mitigating strategies to curb the identified challenges and propose new areas for future behavioral research. It is concluded that any strategy or policy established to assist students to have excellent academic performance requires attention on the behavioral patterns affecting students’ performance.

Key words: *Contextual factors, College, Academic Performance, Behaviors, Learning*

Introduction

Behavior refers to a response of an individual or group to an action, environment, person, or stimulus. In the recent years, students have been exposed to various learning challenges which influence their learning behaviors and academic performance. Some of the challenges include social media services, poverty, peer pressure plus acute and chronic stressors (Jensen, 2010)

According to social theorists, human beings are not like mindless robots responding mechanically in their environment. Rather, human beings think, reason, imagine, plan, expect, interpret, believe, value and compare stuffs (Jennifer & Brenda, 1989; Samuel, 1973). When some try to control their values and beliefs, others resist their control. In social learning theory, Bandura & Schunk, (1981) state that behavior is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning. They also postulated that human beings learn by observing

what others do. Through observational learning, they cognitively reserve the behavior of others and possibly adopt this behavior (Rwegoshora, 2010).

Moreover, cognitive social theorists share the behaviorist belief that learning is the basis of personality and personality disposition tends to be relatively specific and shaped consequences.

The human brain downloads the environment indiscriminately in an attempt to understand and absorb the surrounding world, whether that world is positive or negative. For example, when children gain a sense of mastery of their environments, they are more likely to develop feelings of self-worth, confidence, and independence. These contribute heavily into the formation of children's personalities (Sroufe, 2005) and ultimately predict their success and happiness in relationships and in general life.

Though the body is adequately custom-made to cope with short-run threats to physiological state, chronic or acute stressors challenge the body otherwise (Evans & English, 2002). Volatile stressors rigorously damage the brain's capability to learn and remember (Yang et al., 2003). Chronic stress not only weakens the complexity of neurons in the frontal lobe and the hippocampus but also increases the complexity of neurons in the amygdala, the brain's emotion centre (Conrad, 2006). This increased complexity may make the stressed brain's neurons far more sensitive to memory modulation than neurons in normal brains.

Although the subject of behavioral aspects to students has been widely examined, there is hardly a thorough study that has been conducted to assess the relationship between behavioral aspects and students' academic performance in colleges in Tanzania.

The Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to examine the relationship that exists between students' behaviors and their academic performance in the study area. Such an understanding would accord the provision of strategic measures in the effort of improving students' academic performance.

Specific objectives

In order to accomplish the main aim, the study focused on the following specific objectives:

- a) To identify contextual factors influencing students' behavior towards learning.
- b) To determine the strategies that students use in balancing the time spent on studying and on other non-academic activities; and
- c) To find out the environmental challenges affecting students' academic performance

Literature Review

Today's college students are spending less time studying. The 2003 survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the Graduate School of Education and Information

Studies of the University of California found that, only 34% of fresh students then had spent six or more hours per week outside of class on academic-related work (for example, doing homework or studying) during their senior year in high school (Nonis & Hudson, 2006).

Once students are in colleges, the dual factors of socialization and social status contribute significantly to behavior. The college socialization process typically pressures students to be like their peers or risk social rejection. At the National Institute of Transport for example, majority of students' values, practices and norms are similar. This influences their behavior and the way they interact with both internal and external environments. However, the quest for high social status drives students to attempt to differentiate themselves in some areas such as sports, personal style, sense of humor, or street skills.

Recent proof suggests that, the complex web of social relationships against students experience with peers, adults, and family members exerts a much greater influence on their behavior than researchers had previously assumed. This process starts with students' core relationships with parents or primary caregivers in their lives, which form a personality that is either secure and attached or insecure and unattached. Securely attached students typically behave better in college (Blair et al., 2008). This is because attachment to parents and guardians increases the chance for students to become more disciplined and focused to their studies. Hence, raises the chance for those students to have better academic performance than their peers.

Currently, students have been exposed to various learning challenges which influence their learning behaviors and academic performance. Some of the challenges include social media services, poverty, peer pressure plus acute and chronic stressors (Jensen, 2010). For example, due to the increasing use of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, many students have found themselves in the trap of spending much of their time doing irrelevant activities other than studying. On the other hand, research on relationship between study time and student performance has yielded inconclusive results. Thus, patterns on how students spend time can reflect certain personal attributes of the individual who will soon enter the job market. For instance, self- motivation and abilities to meet deadlines are some of the qualities that employers look for in their prospective employees (Achamma, Shireen, Asokan, Ailiya, & Hassan, 2012).

On top of that, some students cognitive abilities do not match with the expectations of their chronological ages. This is known as cognitive lags. Students learning approaches and styles vary depending on their cognitive abilities and motivations. Therefore, research into students' approaches to learning (Biggs, 1987) has acknowledged the impact of motivational and cognitive processes in learning (Diseth, Pallesen, Brunborg, & Larsen, 2010). Such research has resulted in overarching descriptions of students' learning styles that imply particular patterns of motivation and self-regulatory control. In practice, however, students' performance may depend on changing combinations of motives and self-regulatory strategies across different tasks and contexts (Pintrich, 2004).

Additionally, stress and strain of students' life remain unknown (Wang et al. 2014), so students raised in poverty rarely choose to behave differently, but they are faced daily with

overwhelming challenges that wealthy students never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good college performance.

The central argument behind above explanations is that, students' academic performance is influenced by various behavioral variables such as peer pressure, levels of relationships, social networks and stress levels. However, it should be borne in mind that, less has been done in Tanzania to find out the gaps that exist between behavioral patterns that influence college students' academic performance. This necessitates the need to conduct this study to find out the relationship of the said variables in Tanzania.

Methodology

A case study design was adopted as it was not possible to study all colleges in Tanzania for this study. Research clearance and permission to carry out the study were obtained from the National Institute of Transport (NIT) and all students at NIT were eligible for the study. The study involved 84 participants who were randomly sampled from different programs within NIT.

An English structured questionnaire was used to collect data as it was assumed that the population was familiar with the language as it is used as a media of learning in the country. Also, three FGDs were conducted to selected respondents after filling consent forms. The languages used for FGDs were both English and Kiswahili. This intended to give participants freedom to speak using any language of their interest. All FGDs were recorded, transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Three Research Questions guided this Study:

What are the contextual factors influencing your behavioral aspects toward learning? To answer this question, respondents were asked to identify behavioral variables influencing their academic performance. Accordingly, respondents were asked to expound their attitudes toward the usage of social media and preferred learning styles.

How do you balance on the time you spend on studying and in doing other non-academic activities? Respondents were asked to show how they balance study hours against time spent in other non-curricular activities.

What is the health or environmental challenges that have affected your academic performance in your younger years? Respondents were enquired to mention health or environmental challenges in their younger ages, and how those challenges can be linked with their academic performance at NIT.

Collected data was compiled and coded prior analysis. Content analysis was adopted to analyze qualitative data and descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Of 84 students who participated in the study 55 (66%) were males, 28 (33%) were females and 1 person (1%) did not indicate the gender. The mean age of the analyzed group was 23.6 years (range = 19 to 36 years).

Association between Acute and Chronic Stressors and Academic Performance Acute and chronic stressors entail experiencing regular stresses in the college life, under-privileged social relationships, unclear individual learning styles and environmental backgrounds. Based on the analysis of the results, 14% of the respondents strongly agreed that there is a strong case between acute and chronic stressors and their academic performance

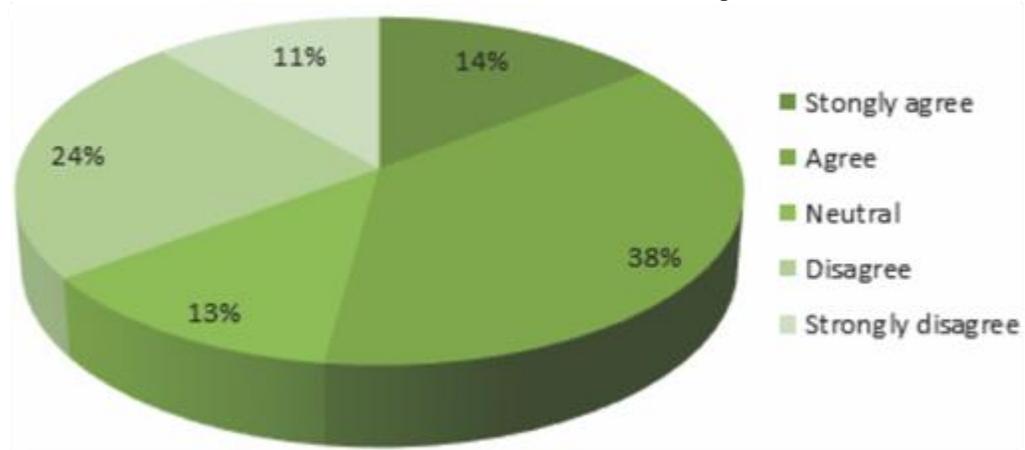


Fig. 1: Association between Acute and Chronic Stressors and Academic Performance

Respondents were probed to justify why they either agreed or disagreed with the statement. Participants who agreed had several reasons behind their agreement. Some of them believed that, the magnitude of stress impaired their studies at the college, thus they needed professional counselors to convey and discuss their whereabouts. As one of the respondents noted that:

“My academic performance is highly disturbed by stress, sometimes I lose focus in my studies. I believe by having professional person to talk to will reduce the level of stress that I face” (Female student, 22 years, second year)

This group of respondents was further probed on the reasons behind their acute and chronic stressors. Their responses were different; however most of them attributed the stress levels to their family backgrounds. As one of the respondent stated that:

“It is complicated, because there are a lot of things that I face. The struggle I go through my studies, the stress and everything make my academic life to be average and it upsets me”. (Female student, 21 years, third year)

Participants who disagreed had numerous reasons behind their disagreement. Some of them were of the opinion that their stress level is at the minimum and does not influence their studies at all. As one of the respondent noted that:

“My academic performance is a result of my own intelligence, guidelines from my lecturers, commitment to studies and motivation from my friends, teachers and relatives”. (Male student, 21 years, second year)

Perceived Association between Emotional, Social Challenges and Academic Performance

Emotional and social challenges that students faced included financial and moral support from family members, ethical and decent friendships, and time spent on social networks. This also entails time spent on social commitments, and amount of money spent on buying books. Based on the analysis of the results, 19% of the respondents strongly agreed that there is a strong association between emotional, social challenges and academic performance; while 30% agreed, 15% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed on whether there is a close relationship between social challenges and academic performance. On the other hand 23% disagreed, and 13% of the asked respondents strongly disagreed that there is a direct relationship between emotional, social challenges and academic performance. The following figure provides the summary:

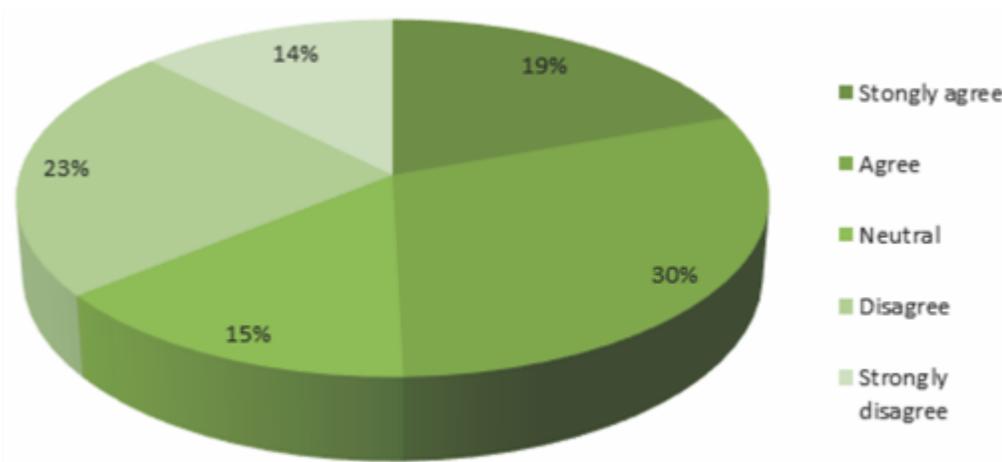


Fig. 2: Association between Emotional and Social Challenges and Academic Performance

Respondents were probed to explain why they either agreed or disagreed that emotional and social challenges influenced their academic performance. Respondents who agreed had several reasons on their agreement. Most of them believed that, poor financial situations have direct influence on their academic performance. This is because they spend many hours thinking about fulfilling their basic needs than studying. One of the respondents justified that:

“Very poor financial circumstance, it affects my academic performance”. (Male student, 25 years, first year)

This group of respondents was further probed to mention the causes on their emotional and social challenges. Their responses were different, though most of them attributed the financial and moral support that they receive from their peers, relatives, lecturers and family members to have contributed to their emotional and social status. As one of the respondent stated that:

“According to my situation and environment always my performance is discouraging because of the shortage of finance and learning materials which may support me during conducting different academic matters (in general financial and social challenges hinder my academic performance)”. (Male student, 23 years, second year)

Participants who disagreed were of the opinion that, the emotional and social challenges are at the minimal level and do not affect their studies at all. As one of the respondent stated that:

“My academic performance is good and many thanks go to all lecturers at my college. I am confident to perform well till the end of my studies”. (Female student, 23 years, second year)

Association between Health and Safety Issues and Academic Performance

Health and safety issues affecting the students comprise safety and security at the college, attachment to parents and/ or guardians, and excellence in mental and physical health. As can be seen in Figure 3, 43% of the respondents reported to strongly agree that there is a close relationship between health and safety issues and academic performance, while 30% agreed. This is not a surprising finding considering the many health challenges that Tanzanians college students face.

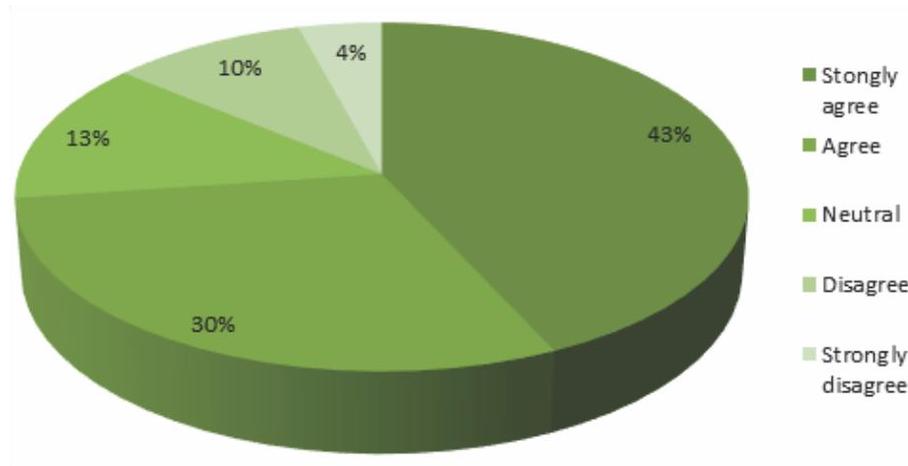


Fig. 3: Relationship between Health and Safety and Academic Performance

This finding may also be promising because some of the respondents associated their status of safety and security with the level of attachment that they have with their parents and peers. As one of the respondent noted:

“I truly thank my family members especially my mother and my sister. Currently, I have built a friendship with my mother in such a way that, I can easily tell her when anything disturbs me. They have never discouraged me”.
(Female student, 22 years, second year)

The finding also shows that most of the respondents perceive they are healthier and secured at the college. This is an incredible finding for the NIT community to ensure they maintain and consider improving the level of hygiene at the campus.

Association between Cognitive Lags and Academic Performance

Cognitive lags include differences between mental and chronological ages, perceptions on the way individual students' view age difference with peers, and student's activeness in accomplishing given tasks. Figure 4 shows that, 16% of the respondents reported to strongly agree that there is no any difference between their mental and chronological age, while 26% agreed, and 20% neither agreed nor disagreed. This is not a surprising finding considering the growth patterns that students pass in various families in Tanzania.

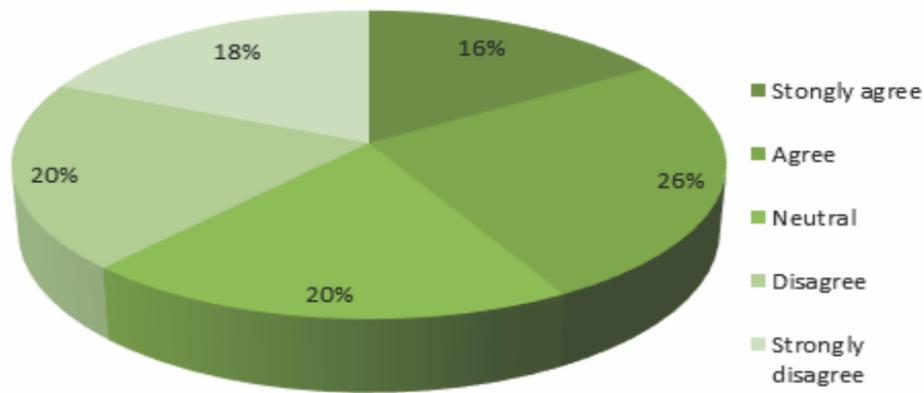


Fig. 4: Association between Cognitive Lags and Academic Performance

Further findings reveal that, 18% of the respondents strongly perceived that their mental and chronological ages differ and 20% agreed to noticing the difference between their mental and chronological ages. This is a significant finding considering the level of education that they are pursuing and the implications on their academic performance. This also shows big challenge to lecturers, guardians and parents in developing this group of students for higher academic performance at the college.

However, some respondents were of the opinion that, they were more active than their peers in accomplishing various tasks given to them. They also believed that peers and friends perceived them to be genius. This findings show that, managements of higher institutions of learning in Tanzania need to streamline teaching methodologies to bridge the gap between the ones who noticed age difference and the ones who believe are super humans as compared to peers. This has been noted from one of the respondents:

“I have experienced hard times in the higher learning institution compared to other previous levels”. (Male student, 24 years, second year)

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the findings it was been revealed that 73% of the respondents agreed that there is a close relationship between health and environmental challenges and academic performance. Also 49% of the respondents agreed that they spent most of their time in attending to social events and networks.

However, some of the identified strategies that students used in balancing the time spent on studying and in doing other non-academic activities were as follows: seeking advice from senior people especially parents and guardians; accepting challenges from peer students; and spending less time in social gatherings. Moreover, they identified attending counseling sessions with professionals and lectures, and creating and complying with personal time tables. Furthermore, 38% of the respondents agreed that they have had cognitive lags compared to their peers. Therefore, these findings imply that there is a strong relationship between behavior and students' academic performance at NIT.

Recommendations

The results of this study have spurred some interesting and important recommendations. The first is that, efforts should be made by colleges to establish professional counseling units which will assist students with social and emotional problems. The second is that the college communities should ensure that they maintain and consider improving the level of hygiene and security at the campuses. The third is that financial and moral support that students receive from their relatives and lecturers have to focus on students' academic growth and performance. Finally, managements of higher institutions of learning in Tanzania need to streamline teaching methodologies to bridge the any existing gaps.

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