



Review Paper

Cracking the shells of Poverty: Review of the Experiences of Academic Toppers

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Abstract

Academic Achievement is a time wherein the students celebrate especially those students living in poverty. Shattered by life's graven circumstances, a group of poor children are determined to succeed in life. They are unmindful of the hardships and odds which make them weak and unconfident. The students have tried out every possible situation optimistically to taste the fruits of success. Herein, the researcher has made an attempt to focus on the academic achievement (high scoring) which the economically disadvantaged children have achieved in their higher secondary examination. The research report summarizes the 'pathway of success' of these students which will definitely be a boon to students who are striving to achieve a landmark in their life yet are disadvantaged socially as well as economically. Data collected is secondary and descriptive method is used to analyze the data. Findings portrait that poverty didn't deteriorate their success but it has prompted them to overcome its challenges thus changing every possible obstacle into accomplishment.

Keywords: academic achievement; economically disadvantaged; poverty.

Introduction

The month of May can be featured with the adjective 'mojo' as it spots out the stories of extreme hardships, braving against the odds and abundant sacrifices performed by our school students. A definite shocking surprise is much awaited for our higher secondary school students who are in the limelight waiting for their public exams results which will decide upon their career. Moreover, for the economically and socially disadvantaged children this is the crucial time wherein the results will determine their life standards. This study has swiped and screwed up the minds who think that success is attributed for the socially and economically advantaged. The ground reality has proved it different in a way that there are instances where students have reached great heights by their educational success in the public examination even though they are deprived of innovative methods of pedagogy, high standards of schools, learning materials, viable environment to study.

This paper enlightens the readers with the success of poor students though their paths to success are characterized by difficult circumstances. It will also set an example to children those who are striving hard to succeed.

Poverty- Unheeding irrespective of its gravity

A person is disadvantaged either socially or economically. Of the two, economic disadvantage deprives them of the necessities in life. It is powerful that it passes from one generation to other generation, from adult to child and from young to old. UNICEF explains that "Children living in poverty

experience deprivation of the material, spiritual and emotional resources needed to survive, develop and thrive, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, achieve their full potential or participate as full and equal members of society". The Nobel laureate Amartya Sen explains Poverty as a condition resulting in an absence of freedom to choose which reflects to as the capability to function effectively in society. Thus, it is evident from the perspective of the Nobel laureate that the condition of poverty defeats the normal functioning of the lives of the people leaving them far behind success. But, this condition can be changed if at all education is considered to be at the threshold in the removal of poverty. Education raises the social and economic level of the students by providing them with better employment opportunities in the future. Education can reduce poverty in a number of ways like they are more likely to get jobs, are more productive, and can earn more. Also, education improves a country's economic growth and thereby generates economic opportunities and incomes. Additionally education brings social benefits that improve the situation of the poor, such as lower fertility, improved health care of children, and greater participation of women in the labour market¹.

Education-the hope for breaking the cycle of poverty

Realities often seemed to be a myth and can be challenged to change: Low income is a strong predictor of low educational performance. It's a reality that students from low income groups are less motivated to take up their studies seriously as they are deprived of their socio-economic conditions. An unstructured and unsupervised nature prevails in the households of the

disadvantaged children. Children lack control over their learning and at times anxious about their future. Also, lack of learning materials makes them feel unconfident about their performance in learning at school and home. But this reality is being shattered by the growing number of disadvantaged students performing well in the exams. A study's conclusion of "Child Poverty and its lasting consequence" results that education is the brightest hope for breaking the cycle of multi-generational poverty².

Deepika Chandrasekaran of Erode, the district topper of 2013 batch among the government school category is a parentless girl who has scored 1150/1200 marks in her higher secondary examination. Her uncle and aunty are her foster parents who by profession handloom weavers earning Rs.5000/month. Their earnings have to be spent for food, clothing, and shelter and also for the education of Deepika and her younger brother. Since studying medicine involves huge cost, Deepika opted for computer science with maths, physics and chemistry though her

dad wished to see her as a doctor. Her schooling costs were also supported by her school headmaster and also from voluntary organizations. The life of Deepika is a source of inspiration for students who are parentless and who wanted to uplift their family through education³.

Sheer determination can shatter the conditions of poverty

Empirical studies concludes that "poverty make oneself weak, unstable and devoid of socio- economic development but students in poverty who are determined to study well can shatter the conditions of poverty and succeed in life". It is been in the forefront to understand a group of students where their financial crisis, abject poverty, lack of livelihood means, family burden and indeed a very short time to study didn't deteriorate their life goal. The reality which has been believed that poverty makes oneself weak and unstable is being challenged nowadays.

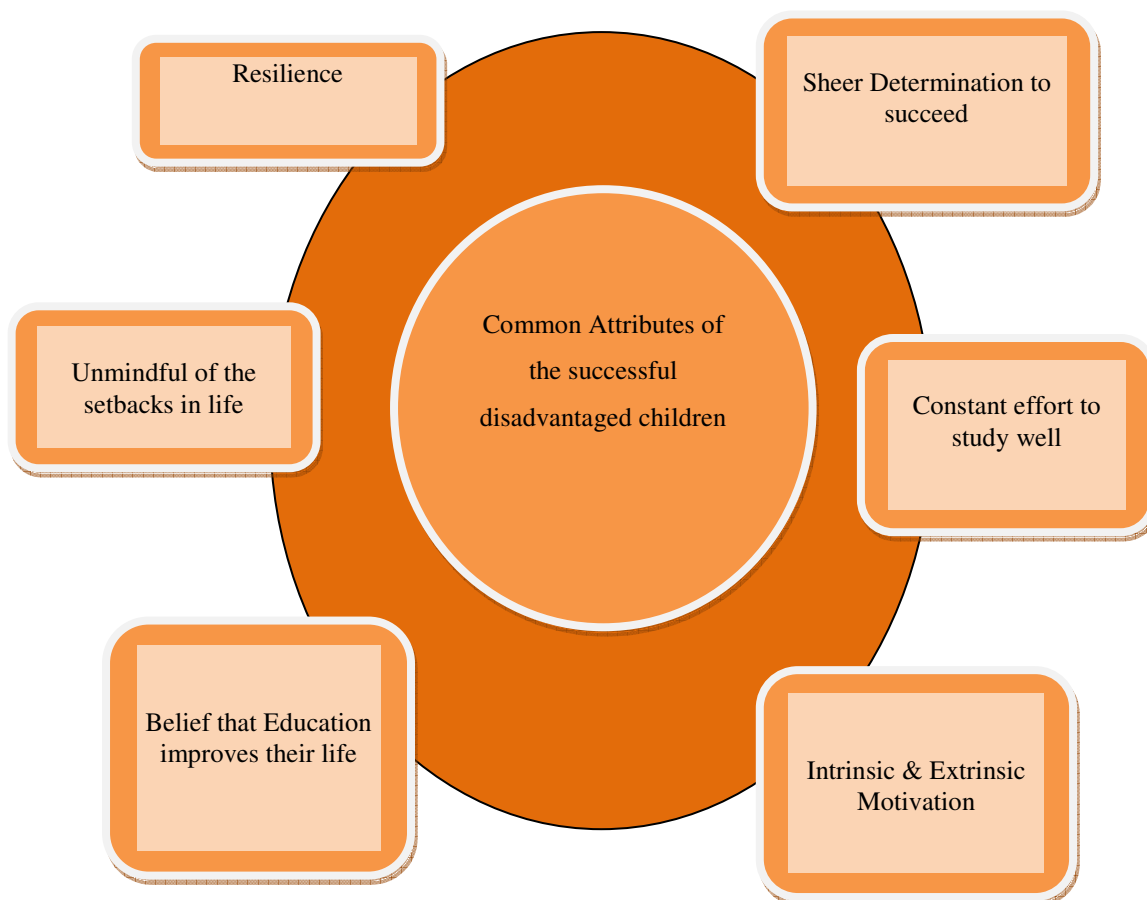


Figure 1
Influential factors which the successful disadvantaged children have in common

Chinnalapatti, a village in Dindigul of Southern Tamil Nadu was spotted by the media after the children became the toppers in the state in Indian culture subject. Being the children of an ex-service man who withhold his service to his family, the mother of these children was keen to bring up the children in flying colors and the sheer determination made the children, Amal Raj and his sister Victoria Rani to secure the state ranks in Indian Culture subject. Scoring 186/200 Rani became the state first topper and Amal who scored 174/200 in the same subject became state second topper. The family was running a petty shop earlier manned by Amal, Victoria and their mom. Their father didn't support their family either and Raj became the sole bread winner after their mom closed the petty shop to help them concentrate in their studies even more. But this decision brought little solace and Raj started to sell greens, curry, coriander leaves and curd in the streets of Chinnalapatti. Earlier his sister helped him but later his mom didn't allow Victoria for street sale. Amal use to wake up 5.30 in the morning purchased greens from the wholesale market/private farms, carried them in a basket on head and sold on the street till 7.30A.M. He hardly had time to get ready to school. Evening study hours and night study at home were the only way he prepared for his exams. His sister was a great source of help to him. They had combined studies, verified past question papers, discussed with previous state rank holders in their school. They were very proud of their teacher's guidance. They acknowledge that hard work never minding the setbacks in life have brought them laurels. Amal aspires to become a lawyer and Victoria as a lecturer not minding of how they would manage the educational expenses but with the hope of succeeding in life⁴.

Parents- influential persons in the educational outcome

The students from low socio-economic background strongly believe that education can raise them to greater standards in life nevertheless of their current situation. These children are more likely in realization of the fact if their educational attainment is not up to the best level, they are to land up in a patchy employment fetching them with inconsistent income.

Also, Ms. Margaret O'Brien Caughy (2013) of the University of Texas School of Public Health in her Spring Lecture series 'Succeeding despite the obstacles: Closing the education gap for children in poverty' says that "Many low income/poor families have strength and the parents engage in positive interactions with their children. Also, most low income parents strongly endorse the importance of education to their children"⁵.

This extrinsic motivation which these disadvantaged children receive is a booster to them. It indeed triggers them to work hard even more so that their every possible attempt to change their living through education is being sort after by these children.

An instance acknowledging that poor families are involved in positive interactions is that a daughter of flower and fruit vendors with centum in 3 subjects bagging 96 percent in Plus two examination was the talk about Kamatchi, who was referred as, 'She belongs to a family of toppers by a teacher. Hailing from a family living in a one room house in Chennai, this topper's success solely depends on her parent's academic motivation. Her mom boasts that, "When my children were small I use to bring them from school, make them study till evening near my flower stall. I want them to get jobs in offices rather working like me under the sun". The seed which her mom sowed when they were small has reaped its benefits. The academic success made the family to cheer for the 3rd time as Kamatchi's elder sisters also has brought laurels to the family by scoring high marks in their plus two exams. To land up in a good job with consistent income, Kamatchi wants to settle all of her father's debt and make sure that her parents lead a comfortable life⁶.

Unmindful of the resources, a record of achievement

A study on "The effects of poverty on academic achievement by Misty Lacour and Laura D. Tissington in the year 2011" concludes that "Poverty significantly affects the resources available to students⁷. The lack of resources make the students struggle to reach the same academic achievement levels of students not living in poverty. The factors affecting student achievement include income, source of income, and the mother's (parents) education level". In spite of the research's findings there are examples of students who are intrinsically motivated to turn these challenges into means of victory.

Dhanalakshmi, daughter of a butcher and a home-maker has secured 198 out of 200 in Zoology bagging the first rank in the state. Her total score in the Plus two exams were 1128 out of 1200. Deprived of good living standards and parent's educational level she was able to achieve her goal. Also, Sindhuja of Villupuram, daughter of a farmer had bagged the state first rank in Tamil subject scoring 199/200. She stayed in her aunty's house during her studies and got 1179/1200. Becoming a doctor is her aim in life and was motivated from childhood itself. Her greatest sources of motivation were her parents, aunty and teachers. She says that she didn't mind of the lack of resources but instead she made smart usage of the available local resources at hand. A day-to-day revision of the taught subjects in home helped her to master the subjects and also helped her to score high marks. Though poverty affects the resources available to the students to achieve it is their determination which drives them to success. The students with zeal constantly try to figure out of where they could get help from. It may their teachers or peers or voluntary organizations offering them a helping hand to handle the shortcomings in life⁸.

Key Findings of the study: i. The condition of abject poverty is overcome by educational accomplishments followed by

standard job and income. ii. The student's belief that 'Education is the ladder for the socio-economic growth of their family and country' is proved by their academic success. iii. Parents and Teachers play the role of 'motivating spirits' intrinsically as well as extrinsically at times of hardships in the lives of the children. iv. The status of low socio-economic status (i.e., in terms of the parent's income and their profession according to this study) didn't demotivate their academic actions to aim for top grades but also earned them a chance to step to high socio-economic status. v. In winning over the grave circumstances of poverty, the students practice absolute will and focus in their studies.

Conclusion

This review study in evidence with the success stories of the poverty stricken students acknowledge that Poverty is a condition which is subjected to change if at all education encompasses it. Positive reinforcement, Motivation and Guidance are the triggering factors which help these disadvantaged children in the move to a greater extent. Also, empirical evidence from studies conducted by social scientists makes it clear that there is significant scope for education to play a role in influencing the economic and social situations of children.

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