A Qualitative Investigation of Academic Success: Insights from High School Achievers

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High School examinations present a significant hurdle for students, and achieving top performance requires a multifaceted approach. The proliferation of the internet has democratized access to knowledge, empowering individuals to pursue self-directed learning opportunities. This study sought to identify the common attributes of high-achieving students with the goal of inspiring and guiding underperforming students to emulate these successful behaviours and elevate their own academic performance. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study utilized purposeful sampling to select seven (n=7) high performing students from Daga Central School. Thematic analysis revealed eleven shared attributes that contribute to academic success: a strong reading habit, focused engagement during classroom instruction, effective time management skills, meticulous organization of study materials, consistent review of learned materials, strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance learning, a supportive school environment, the presence of an inspiring role model, and a close-knit support system comprised of parents and teachers. These findings highlight that academic achievement transcends individual study habits; it is also highly influenced by external factors such as conducive learning environment, positive influence from educators, mentors, peers, and families. The study also discusses the implications of these findings for students, educators and other stakeholders in the educational landscape.

Keywords: Academic success, Habits, High achievers, Underperformers, Qualitative investigation

INTRODUCTION

High school academic achievement is a critical determinant of future success. Studies have established a positive correlation between high school performance and future educational attainment, career prospects, creative output, and income levels (Ahn et al., 2011). High achievers often demonstrate exceptional levels of creativity, are more likely to pursue doctoral degrees, secure leadership positions, and enjoy higher salaries (Shapiro et al., 2015). Additionally, research suggests a strong link between high school success and future leadership roles; a survey of Fortune 500 CEOs revealed that 95% reported being high achievers in high school (Shapiro et al., 2015).

However, not all students reach their full potential. Some may choose not to prioritize academic pursuits, while others may lack sufficient support from parents and teachers. These students, often referred to as "underachievers," exhibit a gap between their potential and academic performance (McCoach & Siegle, 2001). Conversely, "high achievers" demonstrate a strong work ethic, diligent study habits, and consistently strong academic results.

In most educational settings, both high achievers and underachievers are present. Schools, therefore, have a vital role in promoting the academic success of underachievers. This is particularly important in today's rapidly evolving world, where the skills required for employability are constantly changing (Mýtna Kureková et al., 2016). High academic achievement equips individuals with a competitive edge in a dynamic job market. Furthermore, the ability to learn new concepts readily and unlearn outdated information is a crucial skill for navigating the uncertainties of the 21st century (Becker, 2019). This adaptability is a hallmark of high achievers. By understanding the attributes of successful students, we can empower underachievers to emulate these behaviours and ultimately achieve their full academic potential.

While the specific habits of high achievers may vary, certain common attributes likely contribute to their academic success. These attributes could be related to study habits, learning environments, or engagement during classroom instruction. This study aims to identify these shared characteristics that enable students to consistently excel in exams. Through an investigation of the habits and practices of high-achieving students, this research seeks to illuminate the factors that contribute to consistent academic performance. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of current educational assessment practices, which often rely on standardized tests to categorize students as high or low achievers (Smey-Richman, 1991). While not without flaws, such assessments serve a practical purpose in identifying qualified candidates for various roles. In this context, succeeding in examinations becomes a necessary skill for future career opportunities.

One effective strategy for exam success involves emulating the behaviours of high achievers. By understanding their habits and attributes, students can develop effective study strategies and ultimately close the achievement gap (Smey-Richman, 1991). From an educational perspective, exploring the practices of high performers presents a valuable opportunity to identify successful learning strategies. These strategies can then be disseminated to underperforming students, thereby promoting academic equity.

Furthermore, documenting the common habits of high achievers can address existing knowledge gaps in educational research. The resulting knowledge can be utilized by various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, school administrators, and students themselves. By understanding the characteristics of successful learners, both average and low-performing students can develop targeted strategies to improve their academic performance. Ultimately, this study seeks to provide a snapshot of the attributes exhibited by high achievers, with the goal of informing pedagogical practices and promoting student success.

Literature Review

According to the existing literature, there are various factors that influence the student's performance. Some of the pertinent factors include school environment, teacher support, family support, friend circle, motivation and role modelling, reading habit, time management, attention during lessons, revision, notetaking and ICT skills. Each of them is discussed in turn below.

Firstly, school environment, the student's mood is influenced by the type of environment the student is exposed to, in the instructional hour and after instructional hours. Most learning happens outside the classroom after the instructional hours where they interact and play with the information provided by the teachers. Likewise, the classroom ambiance and the school's overall ambiance do play a vital role in overall mood and ease of learning of the students, thus creating the enabling environment in and around the school does influence the students' learnings. The underachievers will achieve better if placed in the school environment that is focused in academic excellence (Smey-Richman, 1991). Students' performance is directly influenced by the environment in which student studies or takes examinations (Yamada et al., 2015). A student taking the test in a quiet and silent place will perform better than a child in a noisy and chaotic environment (Karft et al., 2016).

Secondly, teacher support does influence the motivation level of the students and confidence of the students in carrying out everyday school activities (Jasmi & Hin, 2014; Kiefer et al., 2015). However, the support of the teachers is availed mostly by the ones who are actively learning. In general, most of the students stay idle and rarely seeks teachers support, partly due to laziness and partly due to fear of embarrassment. Despite teachers' constant effort to identify the needy students and provide support, the overwhelming numbers of the students in a classroom (typically not less than 30 students in Bhutan) often makes it difficult to cater to the needs of all the students. However, it is true that teachers' motivation (Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and guidance plays a vital role in making a child inspired and hard worker culminating to better performances in the exams (Azubuike & Oko, 2016). Likewise, Guéguen et al. (2015) found out that the teacher's verbal encouragement has positive effect on the child's academic achievements. In addition, Hamre and Pianta (2001) also emphasized that there is correlation between the positive relation of student with their teachers and their success in school.

Thirdly, family support plays an essential role in students learning. Parents constant monitoring and advice regarding the academic activities of their child dictates the child's seriousness in study and willingness to perform better (Almroth et al., 2020). Students' performance largely depends on parental guidance than teachers input (Jeynes, 2003; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Yamada et al., 2015). Likewise, Henderson and Berla (1994) in their extensive 66 review of studies found out that the families make critical contribution to student achievement in school. Some studies suggest that a child was found to be learning better when parents organize a quiet and comfortable place to study, set higher academic expectations and create opportunities to explore the new subject and meet new people (Karft et al., 2016). Likewise, the parental style influences the kind of the peers their child has and in turn the peer relation mediates the academic performance (Llorca et al, 2017).

Fourthly, friend circle is also very important in students learning and performance (Conley et al., 2015). As the students spent maximum time with their friends it is very crucial that students spent time with positive and hardworking friends rather than negative and easy-going friends, as the study by Conley et al. (2015) found out that the friend's study time strongly affected the other friends study time and in turn achievement. Peers influence the achievement of their friends and studies have found that the child having the positive and high achieving friends are likely to get good grades or perform better in exams (Hanushek et al, 2003; Todd, 2012). The students spent more time with peers and they feel close to them than teachers and parents thus, friends have a major influence in the performance of their friends and themselves, their interactions, and types of activities they do determine their cognitive and behavioural development (Olalekan, 2016). Furthermore, students who meet persistent peers early in their studies may develop better learning habits and a different social

network that results in academic returns (Golsteyn et al., 2021). Likewise, quality peers help in improving academic performance (Berthelon et al., 2019).

Fifthly, motivation and role modelling play a critical role in shaping the things students do and engage themselves to, if there is an intrinsic or internal motivation compounded by the presence of role model a child's learning can be multiplied to the greater extent. Gladstone and Cimpian (2021) in their systematic literature review study suggests that the introducing the role model to the students could motivate the students and make the classroom inclusive. Likewise, achievement goals and intrinsic motivation of individuals can predict the learning strategies and academic achievement (Chan et al., 2012), because this two factors drives the thought and action of a child, getting the right intrinsic motivation and role model will result in performing better in the exams (Solanki & Xu, 2018).

Sixthly, reading is vital in life of every student, reading is very essential part of the learning process (Van Camp & Van Camp, 2013), and to be lifelong learner acquiring the habit of reading is indispensable. It not only helps to set the tone of the academic performance it also determines readers knowing of the world and its wisdom. Learners who have the reading habit bring positive change in academic performance (Ameyaw & Anto, 2018; Oriogu et al., 2017; Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2014; Popoola, 2021).

Seventhly, time management plays a critical role in students learning. Time management skill significantly affects the short-term and long-term learning development (Xu, 2020). How well a student plans his or her time table and available time determines how effective he or she learns and eventually affects the performance in the exams. Studies have also shown that high achievers are usually a good time manager (Alsalem et al., 2017; Karakose, 2015). Making the right choice and right management of available time is correlated to performing better in any activity an individual is indulging in (Indreica et al., 2011; Heydari et al., 2015; Lei et al., 2014; Razali et al., 2018).

Eighthly, revision is crucial for the long-term memory and consolidation of the concepts learned over the period of time. Studies have shown that revision serves as a retrieval function. For example, Luo et al. (2016) found that those who revise the lecture performed better than those who don't. Repeated retrieval is the key to long-lasting memories (Roediger, 2000). Likewise, Kapicke (2009) found out that the act of retrieval itself produces learning. In addition, in another study by Karpicke (2012) also confirmed that retrieval enhances the ability of learners to retrieve knowledge in future.

Ninthly, note-taking is a skill that provides individuals opportunity to involve multiple senses (hand, eyes and brain) making them engage more with the concepts learned than just simply listening or reading. Note-taking is writing down the key ideas in short and comprehensive form (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) which involves listening, reading with summarizing and writing (Fajardo, 1996). Note taking is the highest level of comprehension as one need to summarize the text (Nwokoreze, 1990). Studies have shown that note taking can help to perform better in exams. For instance, Rummer et al. (2017) found out that note taking group outperformed the reading group. In addition, Slotte and Lonka (1999) found that participants who summarized the content of the text resulted in better performance in all tasks in comparison with those who produced notes following the text order or verbatim notes.

Tenthly, paying attention in the class is very important to learning because it allows the conscious information processing (Styles, 1997; Al'Omairi & Balushi, 2015). It has been said that when people pay attention to a specific object, they become conscious of the object's attributes, and when their attention shifts to something else, the object "fades from consciousness." (Laureys & Tononi, 2009, p.64). Likewise, Al'Omairi & Al Balushi (2015) concluded that paying attention in class has an impact on students' academic achievement in terms of comprehension and recall ability. They also further mentioned that training oneself to pay attention in class assists in reaching a level of automaticity that allows students to be attentive for a longer period of time.

Finally, ICT skills in this digitized world are indispensable skills required for any kind of academic activities. Pagani et al. (2016) found out that there is correlation between the ICT skills and academic outcomes in Italy. Likewise, Biagi and Loi (2013) based on 2009 PISA-D data, they found that there is positive correlation between the use of ICT and the academic performance in PISA-D for 23 countries. Similarly, Eng (2005) found that despite varying results of use of ICT in enhancing the academic outcome, the review of existing literature shows the trends of positive correlation with academic outcome.

Theoretical underpinning

The study is underpinned by the Social Learning Theory (SLT) by Albert Bandura. According to Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, underperformers can become high performers as they have the ability to learn by observing, modelling, and imitating the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of high performers (Bandura, 1962; 1977). Likewise, in the context of this study, the study is guided by the premise of SLT. Within the premises of the SLT, the present study proposes that the low achievers can emulate the high archivers and close the achievement gap by observing the high achievers' attributes and by practicing those desirable behaviours (See. Figure 1). SLT suggests that learning occurs in four phases: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1962; 1977). Within the tenet of the SLT, in the context of this study, it can be conceptualized as four phases discussed below:

Attention: The underperforming students pay attention to what the high achieving students do - studying habits, note-taking strategies, time management, etc. They focus their attention on the relevant academic behaviours of the high performers.

Retention: The underperformers mentally rehearse and practice the observed effective behaviours of the high achievers to commit them to memory. For examples; rehearsing flashcard use, reciting information out loud when reviewing notes, which facilitates long-term retention and future replication of these techniques.

Reproduction: The underperforming students begin incorporating and practicing the learning techniques they paid attention to and committed to memory. They rehearse and reproduce behaviours like making study timetable, using spaced interval study sessions, or accessing YouTube tutoring when needed. With consistent effort these techniques can be integrated into the students' own academic skill set.

Motivation: Underperforming students become motivated to continue imitating high performer behaviours through social reinforcement of improved test scores, better report card results, and praise from teachers, and parents, accolades from peers about their progress. These rewards incentivize them to persist in replicating beneficial practices modelled by high achievers.
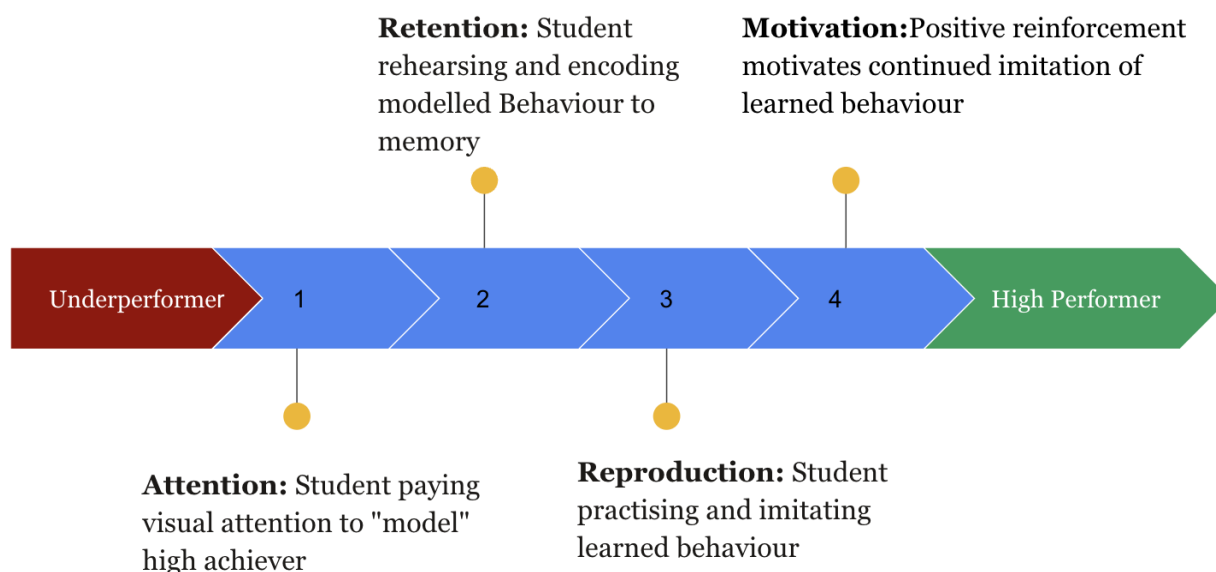
Figure 1. Conceptualization of how Social Learning Theory of Albert Bandura plays out in transforming underperformer to high performer

METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative method using semi- structured interview as the primary data collection tool. The non-probability purposeful sampling was done, and the samples were recruited using the selection criteria. Firstly, the consent letter was under signed by the interview participants. The guiding interview questions were framed (guided by the existing literature on the topic) and then the face-to-face interview was conducted. It was conducted in a safe and secured location and the duration of the interview was approximately 30 minutes per participants. Then thematic analysis was applied to analyse the collected data.

For the purpose of selecting the sample for the study, the following selection criteria were used:
   i)   The participating student should have been at least topper for three consecutive years.
   ii)   The participating student should be currently an overall topper from their respective grades.
   iii) No participating students should be from the same grade.

The number of sample (n) for the study is decided based on the existing literature. For example, Collins et al. (2006) and Creswell (2002) suggested a minimum of 3- 5 participants for the qualitative case studies. However, this study, included (n) =7 participants to ensure data saturation. The pilot test was conducted to ensure the clarity of guiding interview questions and based on this pilot test; minor adjustments were made to the questions to remove ambiguity.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were written and sent back to the respective participants to check its accuracy (member checking). Then the qualitative data was analysed using the Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach. Likewise, direct quotations of participants' responses to the interview questions were also presented to ensure validity.

Ethical consideration

For this study, informed consent was obtained from the research participants and their anonymity is maintained to upheld confidentiality by using the student code such as S1, S2, etc.., in place of their original names.
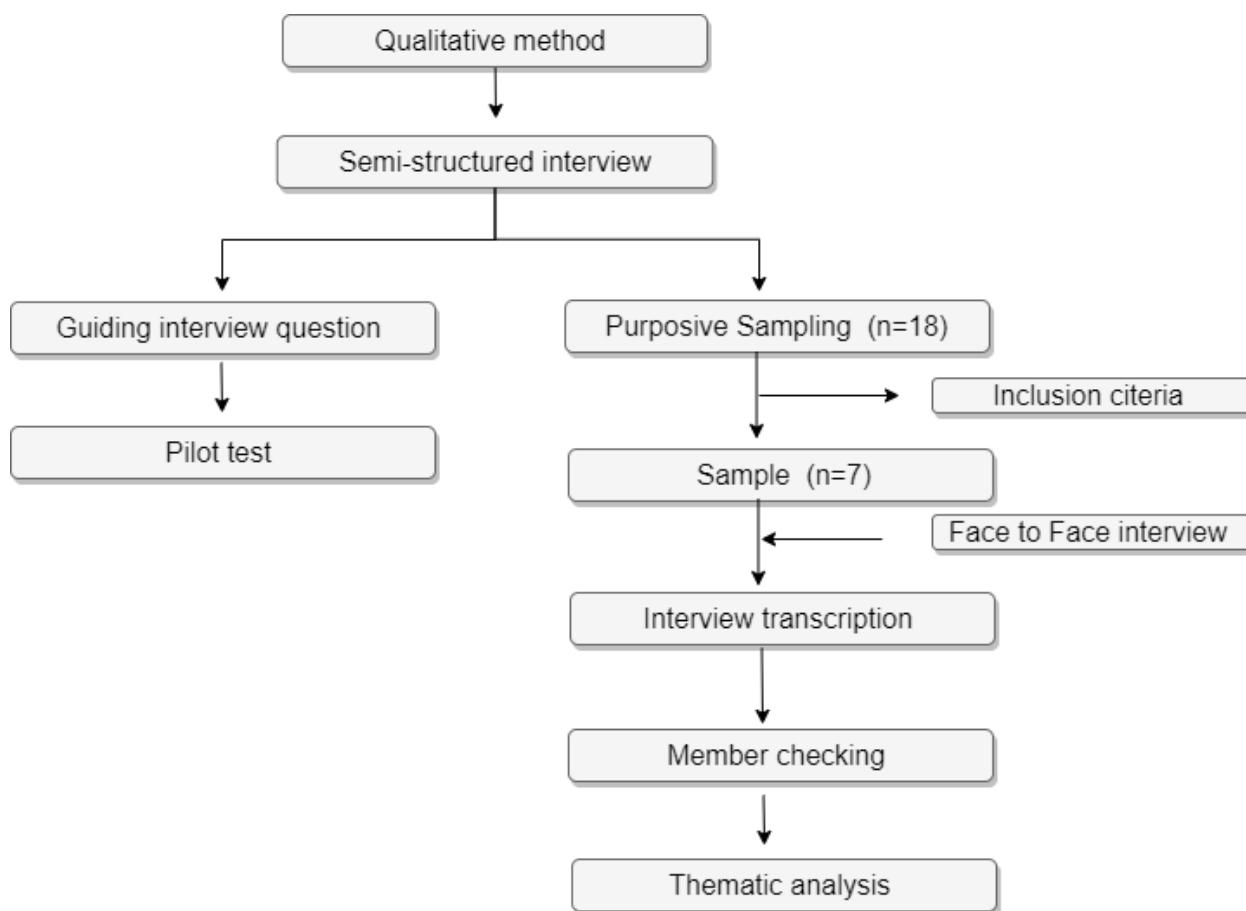
Figure 2. Summary of methodology

FINDINGS

Upon thematic analysis, it revealed that the high achievers attributed their success to eleven major attributes. These eleven attributes are broadly classified into two categories: external and internal attributes. Under external support, the study revealed five attributes: parents, teachers, peers, role models and school environment. Whereas under internal attributes, the study found six themes: reading habit, maintaining study notes, concentrating in the classroom, revision, time management, and use of ICT. The external attributes will be discussed first, followed by the internal attributes. The five external attributes are discussed in turn below.

Parental Support

The interview data revealed that parents play an important role in influencing academic life of their children. Parental influence focuses on trust, advice, financial support, emotional support, and spiritual support. For example, student 1 (S1) expressed that her parents are Buddhist and believe in astrological prediction. Furthermore, their unwavering trust motivates her to work harder.

> *My parents are not educated but supportive. Moreover, they are superstitious and recite Lungta (wind horse) for success. They also consult astrologist and do all the remediation of the obstruction predicted by astrologist. They trust me a lot and I*

work hard in order not to let down their trust. I fear of losing their trust and that makes me work harder.

Moreover, the qualitative data revealed that their parents reminds them to study. For instance, S3 shared that his parents always remind him to study:

My father works in a Bank of Bhutan as a branch manager, while my mom is a housewife. My parents always remind me that education is the solution to every problem. It can empower us to solve our own challenges and contribute to the betterment of others and our nation.

Likewise, S4 asserts that her parents are strict and monitors her studies:

Despite being uneducated, they always nudge me to study and never to lose hope. They are very strict disciplinarian, they always check on whether I am studying or not, and I would attribute my studying habit to their strict monitoring.

In addition, the qualitative data also revealed that parents do support them financially and emotionally. For instance, S6 opined that:

Despite being uneducated themselves, my parents influence me in many ways. They are my everything: my inspiration, motivation, psychological support, and financial support. And, they make me work hard by sharing their experiences of having to work in scorching sun and rain their whole life and how I should not be like them.

Likewise, S7 concurs with the above opinion on financial support provided by parents:

My parents are both educated and supportive. They provide enough time for me to read, takes care of my health and financial needs, and provide mobile and ICT facilities at home.

Additionally, qualitative data also revealed that students are motivated by their parents through rewards and gifts. For example, S5 expressed:

My parents are very supportive, constantly reminding and advising me to work hard. They celebrate my achievements with gifts for good marks and motivate me further with promises of even better rewards if I do even better in the next exam.

Teachers Support

The interview data revealed that supportive teachers help students learn. Teachers' influence is centered on being supportive by giving advice, providing positive feedback, correcting mistakes promptly, being both strict and approachable, teaching in diverse ways, teaching how to work smart, setting individual benchmarks for each student, providing past question papers, and guiding students in solving the complex problems. For example, S5 opined that:

My subject teachers are supportive, providing plenty of advice and correcting my mistakes. They motivate me by giving positive feedback, which encourages me to work hard.

Furthermore, some participants expressed that a strict teacher helps them to stay focused and up-to date with their homework and revisions. For instance, S1 claimed that:

Teachers' trust and strictness make me work harder. I believe fear motivates me to learn more.

Likewise, some participants expressed that approachable teachers helped them learn more as they can approach them and clear doubts by asking them. For example, S2 asserted that:

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> *My subject teachers are very supportive and hardworking as well. They are open and jolly, so I can easily ask my doubts without any hesitations.*

Some participants claimed that setting bench mark and providing past question papers helped them to learn better. For instance, S6 asserts that:

> *My subject teachers' support me in many ways. The most effective strategy they use is setting the benchmark of every subject, which allows us to work hard to achieve it. Moreover, they provide us with past question papers, which help us to truly focus on what matters most.*

In addition, some participants opined that when teachers teach them to work smartly, it helps them to solve complex problems. For example, S7 expressed that;

> *My subject teachers are very supportive. They influence the way I learn and perform, as they have taught me different ways to read beyond memorization, which helps me in clarifying the complex doubts.*

Peers

The qualitative data revealed that high achiever prefers company of good, sincere and competitive friends. For instance, S1 expressed that:

> *Having sincere and good friends can immensely help in learning as a student. My friends help me to be time conscious; we often indulge in intellectual discourse, and they also help in selecting important and difficult topics for revision.*

Likewise, S6 holds the similar opinion as above:

> *To some extent, I also attribute my success to my friends who influence me to work harder. I always keep the company of good friends, those who are very competitive. This helps me to learn various tricks and tips that they use for answering the exam questions.*

Similarly, S4 also expressed similar opinion as above:

> *My friends play a vital role in my learning as we frequently engage in discussions, and clear our doubts together. During these discussions, they listen to me and correct my mistakes, which help me understand my own shortcomings.*

Role Model

The qualitative data revealed that participants look up to senior, parents, teachers, friends and scientist as their role models. For instance, S1 expressed that:

> *I look up to a senior student, who was 2019 Bhutan Board Exam topper. I take him as a role model because he is a diligent and intelligent person.*

Likewise, some participants opined that their parents and elder relatives are their role model. For instance, S4 expressed that:

> *My mom is my role model. She always supports me in the times of need. She guides me and inspires me through her invaluable advices on how to endur hardship and overcome it.*

Similarly, S2 claimed that:

> *My role model is my cousin, who was the topper last year in class XII Bhutan Board exam. She is good in studies and now I can see her getting a lot of opportunities after graduating high school. She is currently pursuing Bachelors in Law. She always makes my family proud. So, I aspire to follow in her footsteps one day.*

In addition, S5 claimed that:

> *I look up to three people; a teacher, parents and friends. There is a teacher who always inspires me with their speeches. My parents, who constantly remind me to focus on my studies. Finally, my competitive friends remind me to be conscious of my own studies, motivating me to keep up with them.*

Furthermore, some students consider scientist ad innovators as their role model. For instance, S7 expressed that:

> *I am hugely influenced by the work of Thomas Edison. He never gave up despite numerous failures, ultimately achieving the success in the end. His story about achieving success after 1000 failures truly inspires me.*

Environment

The qualitative data revealed that a conducive working environment, such as well-furnished IT lab, science lab, clean and serene school environment, promotes learning. For example, S1 said:

> *Working environment does play a vital role in learning process. Having access to science labs and ICT resources at school greatly enhanced my learning experience, which I believe is key to academic achievement.*

Similarly, S7 concurs with the above opinion:

> *Good working environment is essential for learning. For example, quiet classrooms help me focus during lesson, and laboratory work helps me put the theory learned in class into practice.*

Likewise, S5 expressed that:

> *Working environment matters a lot in learning. As one of the captains, I am privileged to have a separate room with fewer members in boy's dormitory. Since I need silence to study effectively, this is a huge benefit. Often, hostels are very noisy and it's hard for me to study. Having a quiet space with fewer people has definitely helped me focus on my studies.*

In addition, it is revealed that for day scholar, supportive parents and home environment promotes better learning. For example, S2 claimed that:

> *I think people can work hard and study more when their environment is positive. The same goes for me. I have supportive parents and they give me enough time to study at home, which helped me to score good marks in exams.*

Reading Habit

The qualitative data revealed that the high achievers spent about 30 minutes to 3 hours reading book on daily basis. For example, S2 claimed that:

> *I read for an average of 30 minutes every day. Approximately, I must have read around 400 or more books by now. Reading books empowers me.*

Likewise, similar assertion is made by S3:

> *I read every day, on average 20 to 30 minutes each day. When I read some books and I don't get the meaning of the phrase or words, I make a point to explore it in internet and in doing so I learn new words and new concepts. This way it motivates me to dig deeper and build my vocabulary.*

Similarly, most of the high achievers' view reading as their passion. For example, S4 expressed his love of reading books as:

> *I really love reading. Daily, I would spend 3 to 4 hours for it. It helped to enrich my vocabulary and allows me to speak eloquently. I prefer reading other books to textbooks. I find textbooks quite dry and uninteresting.*

Likewise, S6 also opined that:

> *Reading book is my passion. I read books as much as I can. Following the advice of His Majesty the 5th King, I aim to read about 10 pages a day. Additionally, I take notes of catchy and meaningful lines. These notes help me while writing my own essays and I believe this practice improves the quality of my writing.*

Similarly, S7 also claimed that:

> *I am fond of reading. I spend almost 2 hours daily reading. It helps me to be informed and knowledgeable. I mostly read science and technology books, as well as books related to STEM subjects.*

Concentration in Class

The qualitative data revealed that high achievers pay attention during the classroom teaching. For instance, S1 claimed that:

> *Out of many habits, I attribute my success to my ability to concentrate during classroom teaching. This helps me to revise concepts more easily later.*

Likewise, S2 concurs with above statement:

> *My secret to being a high achiever is simple: I pay close attention in class and revise the same learning materials at home.*

Similarly, S4 also holds the same opinion:

> *I would say my secret for topping the class is I strive to be attentive in the class during classroom teaching. Moreover, I review the lesson daily when I get home.*

Time Management

The qualitative data revealed that, high achievers are good time manager. For instance, S3 claimed that:

> *I usually calculate time and divide it evenly among the subjects. I have a study timetable that I follow it regularly. If I can't follow the timetable, I balance it by sacrificing my free time the next day.*

Likewise, S4 also expressed the similar opinion:

> *I am aware of managing my time effectively. I have a study timetable and I wake up early at 5 am daily to ensure sufficient time for focused studying. I go to bed by 10 pm to have enough rest.*

Similarly, S6 opined that:

> *I am very time-conscious and I always develop a weekly study timetable. My method is little different from others because I develop it every week based on my understanding of my strengths and weaknesses.*

Likewise, similar opinion is shared by S7:

> *I manage time by maintaining a study timetable. I develop it by understanding my strengths and weaknesses in each subject. This allows me to allocate more time to the subjects I find more challenging and less to those I am good at. However, I make sure to cover all subjects regardless of their difficulty level.*

Revision

The qualitative data revealed that high achievers spent time revising after the in-class teaching. For example, S4 expressed that:

> *In addition to being attentive in the class during classroom teaching, I daily revise the lesson at home to ensure I am well prepared for upcoming exams.*

Similarly, S2 concurs with the above opinion:

> *I pay attention during classroom teaching and make sure to revise them latter at home. By doing this, it keeps me updated and connected with things I previously learned and things I daily learn.*

Maintaining Study Notes

The qualitative data revealed that high achievers maintain neat and succinct notes to refer latter during exam preparation. For instance, S4 opined that:

> *I maintain my notes neatly. When I refer to them, I find the ideas are organized concisely, making them easy to understand motivating me to learn further.*

Likewise, S7 also agree with the above statement:

> *I take succinct notes and refer to them during exams. This saves my time because I don't have to reread whole textbook while preparing. Likewise, it keeps me clam and focused when exams are fast approaching.*

ICT Skills

The qualitative data revealed that the high achievers possess ICT skill and utilize them to enhance their understanding of concepts. They make use of ICT tools, such as YouTube, to strengthen their understanding of the concepts. For example, S7 expressed that:

> *In addition to what I have mentioned, ICT technology has a significant impact on my learning. For example, I watch YouTube videos at home to revisit the lessons learnt in the class. This helps me understand the concepts more clearly.*

Likewise, S6 also concurs with the above statement:

> *I would say I use lot of ICT facilities such as YouTube tutorials and other online materials and it helped me a lot to prepare for the exams. Personally, I found YouTube to be a valuable tool for learning the difficult concepts.*
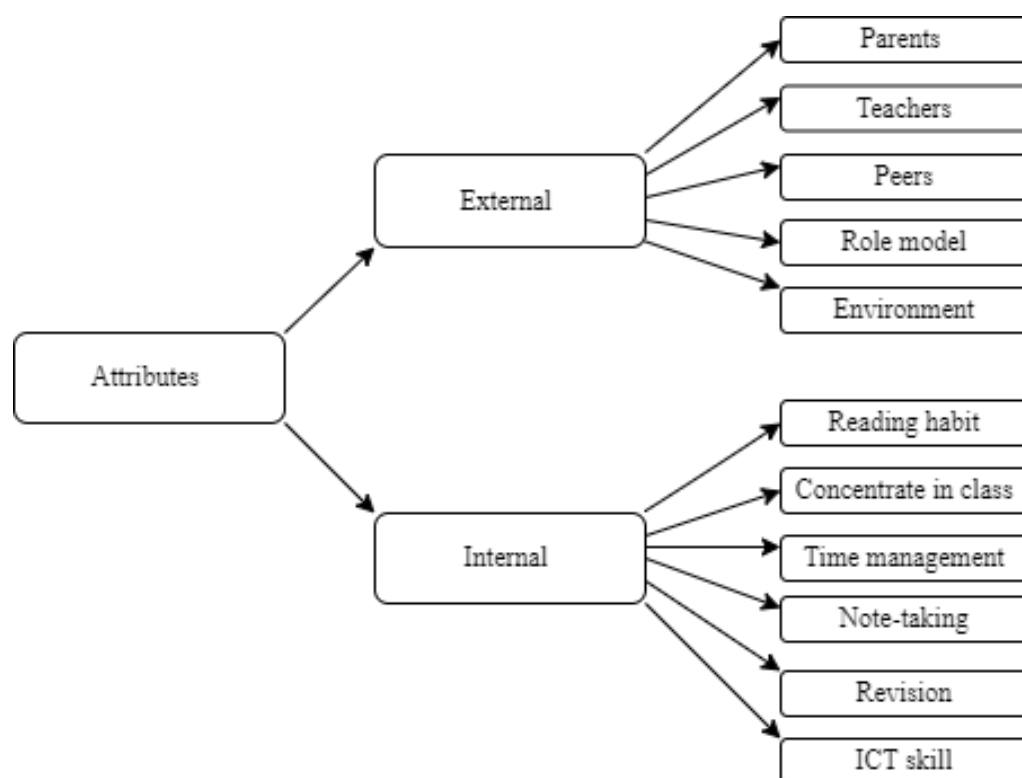
Figure 3. Summary of attributes of high achievers

DISCUSSION

As per the data collected, the study showed that the attributes of the high achievers can be categorized into two groups: internal attributes and external attributes. The study revealed five external attributes and six internal attributes. The five external attributes are discussed in turn below. The study revealed that parent's trust, advice, financial, emotional and spiritual support propelled high achievers. This finding can be categorized under the parental involvement in the lives of students. This finding concurs with several studies (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Jeynes, 2003; Llorca et al, 2017; Spera, 2005; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Yamada et al., 2015) ascertaining the important role parents play in their child's academic achievement. Likewise, study by Ramirez et al. (2014) found that children perceived emotional support from parents as a predictor of their academic performance, illustrating the importance of emotional support from parent in child's academic endeavor. Unique to the context of Bhutan in this study is the finding that the parent's spiritual affiliation seem to have psychological effect on children's achievement. Conduct such as recitation of Lungta (Wind horse- believed to promote the wellbeing and success) (Phuntsho, 2017) and mitigating astrological defilements (or projected obstacles) provided a sense of confidence to students. These findings imply that the parental involvement is necessary for the optimal performance of students.

Moreover, the study revealed a positive relationship between high achievers' performance and teachers support. The study revealed that teachers support such as clarifying students doubts during recess time and lunch breaks have helped the high achievers to progress well in their studies. This finding is in harmony with the existing literature on teachers impact on the students' academic achievement. For instance, Azubuike and Oko (2016) cited that the improved achievement of the students as a outcome of extended teacher support even during the during recess time and lunch breaks. Similarly, Hamre and Pianta (2001) emphasized there is positive correlation between positive student-teacher relationships and their academic success. This indicates that teachers' support beyond classroom and their positive disposition has greater influence on the students' academic achievements.

In addition, the success of high achievers was also attributed to type of friends they befriend. The study revealed that high achievers often befriended with hardworking and academically sound students. This allowed them to discuss concepts, clarify doubts, and engage in intellectual discourse. This finding is in agreement with existing literature where many studies have found that a child's achievement is significantly impacted by types of peers they associated with. As the child spent most of their time with peers, their study habit is largely influenced by peers, influencing their performance in exams (Hanushek et al, 2003; Olalekan, 2016; Todd, 2012). Similarly, in the University of Chile, Berthelon et al. (2019) found that students' associating with the quality peers improved their performances in the exam. The finding implies that in high school as it is formative years where peer influence is high, one must associate themselves with hardworking and academically competent friends.

Furthermore, their success can also be attributed to the inspiration and motivation they derive from their role models. Their role model includes teachers, parents, friends, high-stakes examination toppers, and scientist who inspire them to excel. Likewise, existing literature also supports the concept of intrinsic motivation and role modelling as a means to achieve greater success (Chan et al., 2012; Solanki & Xu, 2018). Furthermore, Jack et al. (2017) also found that the role modelling is an effective strategy to improve student nurses' personal and professional achievement. Thus, it is important to be aware of this effect and it can be suggested that the stakeholders related to school education to be cognizant about it and behave as socially expected and aspire to be a role model to the learners.

Additionally, the school environment, both inside and outside the classroom, plays a vital role in students' pursuit of excellence. Outside the classroom, well-equipped science lab and ICT facilities helps students to solidify their earning through hands-on activities and internet research. Likewise, inside the classroom, they prefer a quiet and focused atmosphere to enhance better concentrations. This aligns with existing research by Karft et al. (2016) and Yamada et al. (2015) where they suggest that a positive school environment can influence a child's leaning and performance. Likewise, a study by Korir and Kipkemboi (2014) in Kenya found that a school environment that feels like second home can positively impact student's achievement. Therefore, maintaining a conducive and supportive environment is essential to improve the learning experiences and performance of students.

Moreover, their success was also attributed to having a good reading habit. All the high achievers claimed that they love reading and, on average they spent at least 30 minutes a day reading books apart from their daily classroom curriculum reading. The existing literature concurs with this finding. Many studies have found that reading habits are directly linked with academic performance. Learners with good reading habits tend to understand concepts with ease and often perform well in their exams, leading to better academic performance compared to non-readers (Ameyaw & Anto, 2018; Oriogu et al., 2017; Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2014). Likewise, Firnas and Rizvi (2021) in their study in Sri Lanka found that a good reading habit is positively associated with their academic performance, indicating that reading is essential for doing well in exams.

In addition, their success was also attributed to focusing in class during classroom instruction. This finding is supported by existing literature. For instance, Al'Omairi and Al Balushi (2015) found that students with high attention spans perform better in exams. They concluded that paying full attention during the classroom instructions helps in information retrieval during the test. Likewise, Douglas (2009) acknowledges that paying attention in class helps students perform better

in exams. Students who pay attention in class learn more effectively because the knowledge is assimilated efficiently, facilitating easier retrieval later.

Furthermore, their success was also attributed to time management skills. Majority of high achieving students mentioned that they maintain a study timetable and deliberately focus on the subject that they find challenging. This shows that they are time conscious and good time manager, which aligns with existing literature that highlights the positive correlation between good time management and better performance (Indreica et al., 2011; Heydari et al., 2015; Lei et al., 2014; Razali et al., 2018). Since wide range of activities are conducted at school, this finding suggests that students who are good time manager can find time for their revision by allocating appropriate time for the different subjects based on their difficulty level.

In addition, their success was also attributed to maintaining proper study notes. The higher achievers maintain clean and succinct notes which they referred during exam preparation as it allows them to focus on core concepts rather than reading everything from the textbooks. This finding concurs with the findings of Rummer et al. (2017) who found out that note-taking group outperformed the reading group. Likewise, Boyle (2013) also found that participants who used strategic note-taking performed better in the exams compare to those who used conventional note taking. Thus, this finding underlines the importance of good note taking skills and maintaining proper study notes.

Moreover, their success was also attributed to timely revision. The majority of the high achievers claimed that they revise the content on daily basis, which helped them to remember better during the exams. This finding concurs with the existing literature. For instance, a study by Kapicke et al. (2009) found that information retention over the long term was significantly higher in the repeated retrieval group (80%) than in the one-time retrieval group (34%). Likewise, another study by Karpicke (2012) confirmed that retrieval practice enhances the ability of learners to retrieve knowledge in future. Thus, this shows the importance of the daily revision and its impact on the exam performance.

Furthermore, their success was also attributed to be able to use ICT in the learning process. They claimed that ICT played a vital role in understanding the concepts as it allows them to immerse into the concepts. For instance, a well animated YouTube tutorials makes learning of difficult concepts easy. This finding aligns with the findings by Kim (2016), who found that ICT use proved helpful in improving students' overall academic abilities, with students preferring watching videos over other materials. Likewise, a study by Nisar et al. (2011) in Pakistan also made similar conclusions, on usefulness of ICT for students' overall learning. This implies that utilizing ICT facilities can help in achieving the educational goals.

IMPLICATION

For Students: The study uncovered six internal attributes and five external attributes. As an individual learner, the study provides learners with insights on how high achievers' internal attributes enable them to achieve high academic performance. From the findings of the study, students can learn the six internal attributes: being a good reader, good time manager, maintaining proper study notes, being an attentive student during classroom teaching, doing timely revision and using ICT to enhance their learning. Underperforming students can emulate and practice these six internal attributes to become high achievers. This is possible, as explained in the earlier discussion on social learning theory. However, success will ultimately depend on the intrinsic motivation to become a high achiever.

For Teachers: This study provides valuable insights on how teachers can support student learning. The findings from the study suggest two approaches; balanced classroom approach and positive student development. Balanced classroom approaches include being strict with submission datelines, behaviour and expectation from the students, while positive student development

approaches recommend teachers to be supportive, caring and nurture students through positive feedbacks, advices and by teaching them to work smartly. Social learning theory suggests that teachers can help underperforming students to become high achievers by first helping them to find role models (high achievers) and second, by motivating them to consistently emulate the positive attributes of their role models.

For Parents: The study offers insights on how caring and supportive parents empower their children to become a high performer, indicating the critical role of parents in the child's learning. The findings from this study suggest how parents can help their children excel. As suggested by the study Parents can learn to trust their children; push them to preform by reminding them of their goals and purpose of schooling. The study also suggests parents to support their child financially, emotionally, and spiritually. Offering rewards in the form of expensive gift for scoring good grade can be a short-term motivator for children to strive to achieve higher grades. However, social learning theory suggest that parents can help their children transition from underperformers to high achievers by helping them find the role model (higher achievers) and guiding them to adopt the positive behaviour of their role models and motivating them to consistently practice the behaviour of their role models.

For School, Curriculum designers and Ministry of Education and skills development: The study highlighted the importance of the school environment in nurturing the learners experience and performance of the learners. The finding from the study suggests having conducive learning environment such as clean and silent environment. Likewise, as per one of the themes that emerged during the analysis of the qualitative data, students do not really like to read the textbook, they think it is dry and boring. Therefore, it can be suggested that the curriculum designers can spice up textbook with relevant illustrations. In addition, it can be suggested that the language used in the textbook to be age appropriate, clear and simple to lure the interest of young learners. Similarly, as featured in the study, school infrastructure such as well-furnished ICT rooms and science laboratories can help engaging the students meaningfully, it can be recommended that the Ministry of Education and Skills Development to prioritize funding for these facilities in schools across the country to promote academic excellence.

CONCLUSION

Through the investigation it is learned that there are broadly two types of factors that have played important role in the lives of high performers in their academy journey. The External attributes such as caring and supportive parents and teachers, good friends, role model and conducive environment positively affects the students learning. Likewise, the internal attributes such as good reading habit, paying attention during classroom teaching, good time management skills, maintaining proper notes, doing timely revision and using ICT such as YouTube to learn the concepts were some of the ways in which the high achievers engage themselves on daily basis that led to their better performance in exams. Likewise, as revealed by this study, it is imperative to note that the students' high performance can be influenced by attributes which is beyond the self (individuals) such as, school environment, teachers support, family support, friend circle and role model, this implies that in order to be high performing students all the external as well as internal attributes must harmoniously co-exist in a school system.

This is a strong indication and a message that all the relevant stakeholders should be cognizant of these attributes that determine the student's academic achievement. All the parties involved in educating a child need to be well informed of these attributes and must work towards fostering those attributes in a child for their optimal learning, which in turn can be translated into observable achievement in the result. Like discussed in the earlier section, by applying the social learning theory's tenet, it is possible for an underperformer to become a high achiever if they imitate the high achiever's behaviour and practice them consistently. Likewise, as the study have uncovered six internal attributes of the high achievers if the underperformers practice these six attributes consistently provided that they receive the support of other five external attributes, it is more than likely that the underperformers can also become a high achiever overcoming the achievement gap.

However, the eleven attributes discussed here are not the exhaustive list of attributes that would lead to becoming a high performer. These eleven attributes were findings from just one school, there can be a number of other attributes which are not discussed here. As this case study was carried out in a single school and it does not constitute all high school populations in the country it cannot be generalized for the whole population. Nonetheless, as it is carried out in the real field, it is logical to derive the pedagogical implication from these findings as it provides the nuances on the attributes of high school high performers.

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