



Academic Excellence:

The Interplay of Social Status and School Environment

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Abstract ;

This study aimed to identify the relationship between academic excellence and the student's social status, as well as the role of the school environment in achieving this excellence. It involved defining academic excellence, identifying the characteristics of academically excelling students, examining the challenges they face, and exploring the influence of social status on enhancing this excellence. The academic excellence produced by the educational system is exclusive to certain students, despite the standardization of curricula and educational programs and the proclaimed equality of educational opportunities across different societal groups .

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1. Introduction

Academic excellence is one of the most significant outcomes of the educational process, reflecting a student's success in attaining high academic ranks. This success is influenced by multiple factors, including the learner's abilities, their social status, and the school environment. This study aims to explore the relationship between these elements by defining academic excellence, social status, and the school context.

2. Concept of Excellence

Defining excellence is complex, as it varies among different perspectives. Some definitions focus on intelligence, while others emphasize high academic achievement, talent, or performance. In this study, we define excellence as it relates to academic achievement, specifically reflected in academic records.

2.1 Linguistic Definition of Excellence

Linguistically, "excellence" derives from the term "fawq" (meaning "above"), indicating a position of height and superiority. To excel means to surpass one's peers, becoming better than them. (Wahba, 2007,p17).

2.2 Technical Definition of Excellence

From an achievement perspective, an "excellent student" is one who demonstrates significant educational progress relative to their classmates, typically falling within the top 5% of their peer group. In terms of cognitive excellence, this includes students with an intelligence score of 130

or higher who also achieve high academic results within the same top percentile.(Ramadane,2008,p23.)

An academically excellent student is characterized by high intelligence and quick knowledge acquisition. Ralph Callow (1980) indicated that academic achievement, as measured by grades, is the most effective criterion for identifying academic excellence. High grades serve as a straightforward indicator of academic success.

The term "excellent" applies to students who perform and achieve at high levels compared to their peers.

3.Characteristics of Excellent Students

Several studies have examined the characteristics of excellent students, particularly those selected for their high IQ and academic achievement, yielding the following insights:

3.1 Mental (Cognitive) Characteristics

Cognitive characteristics are crucial in distinguishing excellent students from their peers. Key traits include:

- High levels of innovation, creativity, perseverance, and sustained attention.
- Ambition to pursue prestigious professions, often leading to success.
- A keen interest in mental and scientific issues, alongside a love for reading and writing.
- Fluency, flexibility, originality, and a rich imagination.
- Creative problem-solving abilities.

- A broad vocabulary, strong idea connections, and notable memorization and comprehension skills.
- Engagement with theoretical and abstract topics.

These students tend to develop faster than their peers in various domains, such as speech, walking, reading, and writing, and can form creative ideas with ease. They are also adept at identifying and addressing knowledge gaps, are aware of their talents, and excel across academic subjects.

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3.2 Psychosocial Characteristics

According to Clark, excellent students exhibit the following emotional characteristics:

- A deep concern for societal values like justice, beauty, and truth, coupled with heightened sensitivity to others' expectations and feelings.
- Advanced moral reasoning and a robust capacity for self-regulation and need satisfaction.
- Intense self-awareness and emotional depth.
- High expectations of themselves and others, often leading to frustration.
- Perfectionism, leadership qualities, and a quick sense of humor used effectively in various situations.
- A strong drive for self-actualization and an extensive understanding of emotional complexities.
- A need for coherence between abstract values and personal actions.

- The ability to envision and address social issues.

In the sensory and physical domains, Clark identified:

- Unique sensory experiences arising from an advanced sensory system.
- A significant discrepancy between cognitive and physical development.
- Difficulty reconciling their high standards with modest athletic abilities.
- A tendency to prioritize cognitive over physical health, potentially leading to neglect of physical activity.

In terms of intuitive characteristics, the following traits were noted:

- Early interest in intuitive knowledge and metaphysical concepts.
- Openness to testing and exploring psychological phenomena.
- A propensity for predicting future events.
- Creativity evident across various domains of work.

Wilberg's studies (1982, 1988, 1994) examined the childhood traits of two hundred individuals who excelled in various fields—scientific, religious, political, and artistic. The common characteristics identified include:

- Focus
- Multi-talented abilities
- Exceptional communication skills
- High intelligence

Additionally, most gifted individuals in Wilberg's classification exhibit traits of

ethical behavior, sensitivity, optimism,

3.3 Educational Characteristics

Excellent students often exhibit advanced learning abilities, including faster acquisition of walking and talking skills. Some demonstrate the capability to read and calculate before starting school. They are characterized by strong memory, keen observation, abstract thinking, and a quick grasp of scientific concepts and principles. Additionally, they possess a rich linguistic repertoire.

4. Characteristics of the Family Environment of Excellent Students

Research on the backgrounds of scientists, creators, and other high achievers reveals common themes, particularly concerning the family environment in which they were raised. Ahmad Abdul Latif summarizes these findings as follows:(Abdulatif,2011,p210_211-212-213)

4.1 Family Size

Studies indicate that gifted children typically come from relatively small families. This smaller family size allows for increased parental attention, as parents can spend more quality time with their children.

4.2 Child's Order in the Family

Research, including Terman's studies, suggests that gifted children are often either only children or the eldest among siblings. A study by Albert, which focused on presidents, vice presidents, ministers, and Nobel Prize winners, found that 75%

and broad appeal.

of these individuals held special positions in their families, such as being the eldest, the only child, or the youngest.

4.3 Parents' Age

Gifted children often have relatively older parents, indicating greater maturity and stability, which positively influences their upbringing.

4.4 Parents' Educational and Professional Level

Most studies have shown that parents of excellent students tend to have higher educational qualifications than others and often occupy professional and administrative positions.

4.5 Family Relationships

The family environment of excellent students is characterized by understanding, harmony, mutual respect, and stability among family members.

4.6 Family Upbringing Methods

The approach to family upbringing plays a crucial role in developing the creativity and talents of excellent students. Key elements include encouragement, the provision of freedom and opportunities for dialogue, and the absence of authoritarianism, inconsistent treatment, and favoritism among siblings.

Research indicates that family upbringing significantly shapes a child's personality traits. Parents who foster exploration and

understanding of the environment reinforce their child's independent behavior, allowing them to act with a high degree of freedom. Conversely, children who experience punishment in similar situations tend to grow up with a diminished inclination towards independent action.(huda,2015,p25)

5. Identifying Gifted and Excellent Students

Identifying gifted and excellent students is a crucial stage in supporting their educational journey, as it informs how educators and parents can best cater to their needs. Most studies on academic excellence emphasize the significance of this identification process, which typically involves several stages:

5.1 Investigation Stage

In this initial stage, students are nominated by teachers and parents according to a predetermined program set by the educational administration. After standardizing the qualifications of teachers, the nomination process begins. Those involved in this stage usually nominate students who exhibit distinctive traits such as obedience, cooperation, cleanliness, health, and compatibility with the classroom environment. (Jarrwan,2002,p105) This stage is vital for accurately identifying gifted students and is among the most effective and widely utilized methods in various countries.

5.2 Tests and Measures Stage

The next stage involves collecting objective data from available tests, which assist those managing the gifted and excellent education programs in justifying their decisions. The primary goal of this stage is to narrow down the number of nominated students from the first stage. The tests used to identify gifted and excellent students typically fall into five categories: individual intelligence tests, group intelligence tests, academic aptitude tests, academic achievement tests, and creativity and creative thinking tests5(Jarrwan,2002,p105)

6.Problems of Excellent Students

Like all students, excellent students encounter various problems and crises. However, based on their earlier mentioned characteristics, they often possess the ability to confront and resolve these challenges, which can vary based on their surrounding circumstances. These problems can be categorized into family issues, school-related challenges, and social adjustment difficulties.

6.1 Family Problems

The family environment is pivotal in shaping a child's personality, influencing their behaviors and attitudes. Throughout their upbringing, children may face problems that differ in severity from one family to another. Abdel Rahman Sayed Suleiman outlines several common issues faced by gifted children as reported by researchers:(Suleiman,2005,pp355-358).

- **Parental Indifference:** Parents may overlook their child's talents and abilities, failing to recognize their potential.
- **Neglect and Mockery:** Some parents may dismiss or ridicule their excellent child's capabilities due to their own limited understanding and experience regarding giftedness.
- **Overestimation of Excellence:** Conversely, some parents may exaggerate their child's abilities, pressuring them to achieve beyond their capacities.
- **Neglect of Emotional Needs:** There may be an emphasis on meeting intellectual needs at the expense of emotional support, love, and appreciation.
- **Sibling Adjustment Issues:** Excellent students may struggle to relate to their siblings, as their distinguished position in the family can lead to feelings of inadequacy among other children, who may perceive themselves as less intelligent or capable.

In addition to the family problems mentioned by Abdel Rahman Sayed Suleiman, other challenges faced by excellent students include:

- **Economic and Social Disparities:** Some excellent students may feel that their economic and social circumstances do not align with their future aspirations.
- **Lack of Resources:** Families may lack the necessary tools and

resources to nurture the child's talents and aptitudes effectively.

- **Time Constraints:** Busy schedules may prevent the child from engaging in activities they are passionate about.
- **Overprotection:** Excessive parental protection can stifle the child's imagination and creativity.

6-2 School Problems

Excellent students encounter several challenges within the school environment, including:

6-2-1 Learning Speed Discrepancy

Many excellent students learn at a pace that exceeds typical learning speeds. The standard curriculum is often tailored to the abilities of average students, leaving gifted learners unchallenged and unresponsive to the material, which fails to align with their cognitive capabilities and achievement rates.

6-2-2 Inadequate School Programs

The ambitions and needs of excellent students often surpass what is offered in regular school curricula. Standard educational materials and services are typically designed for average students, which can leave gifted learners feeling underserved and unfulfilled.

6-2-3 Declining Enthusiasm

Traditional teaching methods frequently lead to boredom and frustration for academically excellent students. They require engaging and innovative

instructional approaches that align with their advanced mental abilities and imaginative capacities.

6-2-4 Low Achievement and Student Disengagement

Curricula are often structured around age-homogeneous groups, neglecting the individual differences among students. When teachers overlook the capabilities of excellent students and fail to address their specific needs, these learners may become disenchanted and disengaged. Moreover, evaluation methods that focus solely on grades can further diminish the motivation of excellent students, resulting in lower academic achievement. Consequently, schools may inadvertently act as barriers to the development of these students' skills and talents, rather than fostering their growth.

Yahya Salah Madi identifies several school-related problems that affect excellent students, including:

- **Desire for Obedience:** Teachers often prioritize student obedience and may dismiss unconventional ideas or independent behaviors from gifted learners.
- **Inadequate Teaching Methods:** The teaching methods employed and the teachers' abilities may not effectively nurture or develop the creative potential of excellent students.
- **Neglect of Individual Differences:** A failure to consider individual differences in both the quantitative and qualitative distribution of

students in the classroom can diminish the recognition and development of an excellent student's abilities.

- **Limited Access to Enrichment Opportunities:** There is often a lack of scientific excursions to research centers, as well as a scarcity of engaging scientific activities that can occupy an excellent student's free time.
- **Peer Jealousy:** Excellent students may face jealousy from their peers, leading to avoidance behaviors that result in feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- **Misaligned Curricula:** School curricula and courses frequently do not take into account the varying levels of ability among excellent students, causing them to disengage from the material.(Madi,2006,p51-53)

Teaching Methods

Teaching methods are numerous and diverse, encompassing indoctrination, discovery, discussion groups, induction, cooperative learning models, problem-solving, self-learning strategies, and more. One of the most common yet controversial methods is the indoctrination approach. This method is often seen as a constraint on learners' abilities because it emphasizes a one-sided dynamic where the teacher dominates the learning process. As a result, this can foster fear, oppression, one-dimensional thinking, passivity, emotional dependence, and diminished self-confidence in learners. In

such an environment, critical dialogue, discussion, and freedom of expression are stifled, as deviating from the prescribed text is often discouraged. Consequently, students become trapped in a “memory culture,” focused solely on memorizing content and accepting everything presented by the teacher without question or critique.

6.3 Social Adjustment Problems

Academically excellent students often encounter several social adjustment challenges, including:

6.3.1 Difficulty in Forming Friendships

The exceptional abilities and talents of gifted students can impede their ability to forge strong friendships with their peers. Other students may feel intimidated by their excellence, leading these gifted individuals to withdraw and become introverted. As a result, signs of introversion and reluctance to engage in group activities may emerge. Additionally, excellent students often refrain from participating in their peers' games due to a significant disparity in cognitive abilities, which further alienates them.

6.3.2 The Problem of Skipping School Years

When a gifted student excels academically, they may be accelerated to a higher grade level. However, this advancement can lead to difficulties in social adjustment, as younger students may face harassment from their new

classmates, who might not accept them due to their age. This situation can complicate the excellent student's ability to adapt to their new environment.

6.3.3 Feelings of Inferiority and Alienation

Gifted students are often acutely aware of their differences from their peers, possessing unique abilities and skills that set them apart. This realization can result in feelings of inferiority and alienation, making social adjustment a significant psychological challenge for them.

7. Education and Social Classes

The educational system clearly mirrors the social structure of any society and perpetuates it by reflecting the interests of the dominant class. In a class-based society, schools function as instruments for the dominant class, designed to serve their political and economic interests. This dynamic is particularly evident in modern capitalist societies, where educational institutions are structured to maintain existing inequalities.

In Arab societies, we can identify three main social classes that have emerged over the past century and a half:

-Bourgeois Class: This class owns the means of production and holds leadership roles in society. Its members are prominent in economic, political, and social arenas, enjoying prestige, influence, and power. This class includes individuals from former aristocratic families, major capitalists,

religious scholars, tribal leaders, and wealthy professionals.

-Middle Class: This group consists of both old and new segments, including various professionals and small business owners.

-Working Class: This class includes peasants, laborers, and individuals engaged in low-wage employment.

The disparities among these social classes significantly affect educational opportunities. Students from families belonging to the prestigious class encounter far fewer obstacles than their peers from impoverished backgrounds. The cultural environment at home closely resembles that of the school, where resources such as funding, materials, and support are readily available. These students are typically able to focus solely on academic success.

In contrast, a student from a lower economic background faces numerous challenges, including financial constraints that limit access to educational tools and resources. This student may be preoccupied with family issues and the need to support their household while pursuing education. Although the economic challenges can lead to negative attitudes toward education, it's important to note that not all students from disadvantaged backgrounds are destined to fail academically. Some manage to achieve success, motivated by family values that prioritize education and knowledge.

The influence of social origin extends across all dimensions of a student's experience, significantly shaping opportunities and living conditions, serving as a fundamental aspect of their existence. (Bourdieu et Passeron, 1985, p23)

7.1 School and the Reproduction of Social Relations

Schools act as tools for the dominant class, aimed at preserving and reproducing its culture. The concept of cultural reproduction refers to the methods adopted by schools, in collaboration with other social institutions, to perpetuate social and economic inequalities across generations.

The educational system acts as a tool exploited by the dominant classes to sustain social inequality by perpetuating inherited social statuses. This system preserves the hierarchy among individuals, influencing their future social positions.

7.2 Equal Educational Opportunities

The concept of **equal educational opportunities** is rooted in the principles and values of democracy, representing a practical application of democratic ideals. Democratic education promotes the principle of equal educational opportunities for all individuals, irrespective of their social class or background. (Naim, 2009, p339)

Most developed nations strive to democratize education by standardizing curricula and educational programs, ensuring free and compulsory education.

This approach guarantees that individuals from various social backgrounds can equally benefit from educational opportunities, making schools accessible to all students and providing fair chances for everyone. (Jamil, 2015,p19)

Equal educational opportunities involve granting all learners the chance to develop their abilities, regardless of their economic or social status. It does not imply the elimination of individual differences among students or treating all students identically; rather, it advocates for tailored education that meets each individual's abilities and readiness. In an open society, opportunities for developing talents and skills are available to everyone, allowing individuals to determine their social positions rather than being confined by their social class. (Hamdi, 2003,p216)

However, the reality within educational institutions often falls short of true equality. While students enter school with varying abilities and talents, standardized curricula do not account for these differences. As a result, the educational programs may serve specific groups based on their cultural and social capital, failing to meet the needs of all students.

7.3Criteria for Equal Educational Opportunities

Research by Henry Levin on equal educational opportunities in Western Europe identifies four key criteria: (Hamdi,2003,p222-225)

-Equality in Access to the Educational System: Ensuring that education is free for all learners, regardless of their social or economic background.

-Equality in Educational Participation: Guaranteeing equal participation in education, both in terms of quality and quantity, for individuals from diverse social origins. Levin highlights barriers that may hinder participation, such as family-related and school-related obstacles. Family-related barriers include lower educational expectations among poorer families and financial constraints limiting access to educational resources.

-Equality in Educational Outcomes: Achieving equality in outcomes means that students from different social backgrounds attain similar educational results throughout their academic journeys. However, this does not solely focus on the quantity of learning; it emphasizes equipping students with the attitudes and skills necessary for becoming productive members of society. Research, such as Douglas's study, shows that social class significantly influences academic achievement, with disparities in success evident among students from different backgrounds.

-Equality in Educational Impact on Life Opportunities: Following Douglas's findings, many scholars in the sociology of education have questioned whether students from

varied social backgrounds, who achieve the same academic results, will have equal life opportunities regarding careers and wealth. Studies indicate that children from dominant social classes tend to secure better jobs and accumulate more wealth than their peers from poorer classes.

8. Conclusion

From this discussion, it is evident that academic excellence is an educational phenomenon shaped by the educational system, influenced by various factors with differing degrees of impact. Some of these factors are intrinsic, relating to a student's physical, mental, and socio-psychological characteristics, while others are linked to the social determinants of their family environment.

A student's social status can positively influence academic outcomes. Those from higher social backgrounds often do not face conflict or contradiction between their home and school environments. They typically receive the necessary material and emotional support from their families, enabling them to focus solely on their studies. All the social conditions provided by the family contribute significantly to the student's academic success.

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