

The Study of Attributions of Low Achievers and High Achievers about the Perceived Causes of their Success and Failure: the Case of Adolescent Students in Secondary Schools - Malawi

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the attributions of high and low achieving students about the perceived causes of their success and failure. It is of vital importance in the teaching and learning process, as attribution entails beliefs and explanations of low achievers and high achievers about their success and failures. The major objective of the study was to apply the attribution theory in school situations and to test the validity of results. The results will be very helpful to provide a guideline for students as well as for practitioners such as teachers and student teachers in the field of education. The study is important with reference to the motivation of students for learning. The results of the study may be useful for both low achievers and high achievers to improve and also to change their beliefs about the causes of their success and failure. The results were obtained from various students and teachers in secondary school in Blantyre. Questionnaires, focus group discussion and informal interviews were used to collect data for the study. The study found that indeed students attribute success and failure to various components such as ability, effort, task difficulty and luck as propounded by the attribution theory by Weiner and Heider. The attributions however differ from individual to individual depending on the ability and experience of the students. The comparison of high achievers and low achievers showed that high achievers attributed their success and failure mostly to effort and ability. On the other hand, low achievers associated their test and examinations outcomes with luck and task difficulty.

Keywords: Self-esteem; Motivation; Internal and external attributions; Academic achievement; High and low achievers; Performance

Introduction

Attribution in simple terms refers to the reasons we give for success or failure. Attribution denotes saying or believing that something is the result of a particular thing [1]. Yoon [2] observed that achievement in adolescents becomes a crucial issue, such that they begin to perceive current successes and failures as predictors of future outcomes in the adult world. Thus teachers need to be cautious about students' attributions which eventually affect their motivation. The focus of the study was to investigate the attributions of low and high achievers about their perceived causes of their success and failure. It is of vital importance in teaching and learning process, as attribution means beliefs and explanations of low achievers and high achievers about their success and failure. Adolescents in Malawi can be classified vis-a-vis academic performance attributions basing on categories of schools they emanate from whether conventional secondary schools or community day secondary schools as well as their rural or urban locality. Those in conventional secondary schools compared to their community day secondary school counterparts have been noted to have more internally aligned attributions. The same applies to students in urban localities compared to their rural counterparts. In the light of previous literature it was hypothesized that high achievers attribute their success and failure to their ability and effort and low achievers attribute their success and failure to task difficulty and lack of ability or luck. Weiner [3,4] observed that attribution theory is probably the

most influential contemporary theory with implications for academic motivation. It incorporates behaviour modification in the sense that it emphasizes the idea that learners are strongly motivated by the pleasant outcome of being able to feel good about themselves. It also incorporates cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory in the sense that it emphasizes that learners' current self-perceptions will influence the ways in which they will interpret the success or failure of their current efforts and hence their future tendency to perform these same behaviours. According to Santrock [5] attribution theory states that the explanations that people tend to make to explain their success or failure can be analyzed from internal and external points of views. The focus was mainly on the adolescent youths in secondary schools in order to establish how they attribute their success and failure in schools.

The major objective of the study was to apply the attribution theory, and establish as to whether students attribute their success and failure to four factors namely, ability, effort, task difficulty and luck in school situations and test the results whether the theory is valid or not in the Malawian set up.

The Attribution Theory in Relation to Learning and Performance

Weiner [3,4] observed that attribution theory is probably the most influential contemporary theory with implications for academic motivation. It incorporates behaviour modification in the sense that it emphasizes the idea that learners are strongly motivated by the pleasant outcome of being able to feel good about themselves. It also incorporates cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory in the sense that

it emphasizes that learners' current self-perceptions will influence the ways in which they will interpret the success or failure of their current efforts and hence their future tendency to perform these same behaviours.

According to Santrock [5], attribution theory states that the explanations that people tend to make to explain their success or failure can be analysed from internal and external point of views. Explaining motivation from an attribution perspective, Weiner [6] describes that in achievement contexts, the process of motivation begins with the examination outcome. If the outcome is positive, the student is happy and if the outcome is negative then their frustration and sadness lead them to causal ascriptions. Examining emotional diversity in the classroom, Weiner [7] enlist anxiety as a self-directed emotion. This is most concerning emotion for educational psychologists. Appraisals generate emotions like envy, scorn, admiration, anger, gratitude, guilt, indignation, jealousy, regret, shame and sympathy. He suggests broadening the study of emotions in achievement contexts as emotions have their social context and functions too that need to be addressed.

Attribution theorists have pointed out that we often observe others from a different perspective than we observe ourselves [8,9]. When we act, the environment commands our attention when we watch another person act, that person occupies the centre of our attention and the environment becomes relatively invisible. When our actions feel intentional and admirable, we attribute it to our good reasons, not to the situation. It is when we behave badly that we are more likely to attribute our behaviour to the situation, while someone observing us will spontaneously infer a trait. Attribution theory is closely associated with the concept of motivation, it describes that a person's attributions for success or failure ultimately determines the amount of effort he will exert on that activity in the future, in other words these attributions predict his future achievement behavior [10,11]. Students will be more persistent at academic tasks if they attribute their academic successes to either internal, unstable, factors over which they have control (for example, effort) or internal, stable factors over which they have little control but which may sometimes be disrupted by other factors (for example, ability disrupted by occasional bad luck). Therefore, one way to change our motivation is to change our beliefs and attributions. Weiner's theory has been widely applied in education, law, clinical psychology, and the mental health domain. Weiner [3] states: "Causal attributions determine affective reactions to success and failure."

The Research Setting

The study was conducted in five (5) selected secondary schools in Blantyre-Southern Part of Malawi: Chimwankhunda, Nankumba, Mpemba, Zingwangwa and St Catherine. The schools included public and private schools, rural and urban schools to get a variety and valid information which can be generalized. Considering the fact that the study could be conducted in any part of the country, the study was conducted in this area due to its convenience to the researcher and also to make use of the limited time which was available. Depending on the nature of the study which involved students as well as obtaining progress records from the school, consent and permission were sought from the authorities so as to allow the students to fill in the questionnaires and participating in focus group discussion.

Materials and Methods

The study triangulated qualitative and quantitative research designs for more insights on the topic under study to collect enough and valid data for the project. Mixed methods were applied in all domains of research methodology; sampling, instrumentation and analysis. Triangulation was utilized for purposes of corroboration but above all else to offset the weaknesses of either approach used singlehandedly. A survey method through the use of questionnaires was mainly utilized for student respondents. Interviews were used for teachers as well as some students to allow for more probing as most items in the questionnaire were close-ended. In addition to the questionnaires, and interviews; focus group discussions were also to collect data for the study. Focus group discussions were used to minimize time wastage and allow some students who would not be comfortable with face to face interviews to give their opinions. Informal interviews were conducted with teachers because of their flexibility and ability to collect large amount of information judiciously. The questionnaires were structured in a manner as to contain both open and closed ended questions. Open ended questions were included so as to probe more information from the respondents. The respondents who participated in the study were secondary school adolescents from five secondary schools. The research site was basically chosen due to its proximity to the researcher and time factor as the researcher had limited number of days to conduct the study. The schools were:

- Zingwangwa Secondary School (Double Shift),
- Mpemba Private Secondary School,
- St. Catherine Private Secondary School,
- Nankumba Community Day Secondary School,
- Chimwankhunda Community Day Secondary School.

The schools sampled included Government and Private schools as well as rural and urban secondary school to ensure equal representation of the categories of schools in Malawi. There were 24 male respondents and 26 female respondents which managed to balance the representation of both boys and girls. Each school contributed at least one teacher who filled in the questionnaires representing teachers at the school.

On instrumentation, questionnaires questionnaires were structured in a manner as to contain both open and closed ended questions. Open ended questions were included so as to probe more information from the respondents. The questions were designed to get information about students' attributions regarding the causes of their success and failures. The other part was to investigate if students' attributions have impact on their motivation. As argued by Boruchovitch [12] learners' attributions affect the motivation which eventually impacts their performance in learning as they can either put more effort or withdraw their effort.

The focus group discussion was conducted to allow students express freely about their perceived causes of their success and failures and have chance to elaborate their suggestions. It was through focus discussions that it came out clear that learner's ability indeed affects their attributions. Listening to their defenses, one could notice the category of ability where he or she belonged as indicated in the progress records. Most learners during the focus group discussion showed interest to explain their feelings and concerns about success and failures. Students clarified the reasons why attributions might affect one's motivation.

Results and Discussion

All 50 questionnaires administered were filled in by students from the five secondary schools. The study unraveled that indeed students attribute success and failure to various components such as ability, effort, task difficulty and luck as propounded by the attribution theory. Respondents could be classified depending on these aforementioned categories. Notwithstanding attributions however differ from individual to individual depending on the ability and experience of the students [4]. The study also found that attributions made by students towards their success and failure have impacts to the performance and motivation of the individuals. This corresponds with Weiner [13] findings that high achieving students attribute success to internal factors while low achieving students attribute success and failure to external factors. Each school contributed at least some high achieving students and some low achieving students. This was done by sampling the students from the top ten and bottom ten lists of the students' progress record books. Zingwangwa was highly represented due to its nature because it has two shifts so the study made sure that each shift is represented and has taken part in the study. 80% of the students were from senior class, form three.

The results on the causes of success showed that among the items that were suggested to cause success among students; effort was given many votes with 52.3% as a leading factor or causer of success. Ability came second with 22.7% followed by task difficulty with 15.9% and 9.1% attributes to luck being the last. However, this differed from school to school; it was observed that students who got selected to their schools were mostly above average learners than those who did not get selected. Students from a rural private school attributed success to both internal and external factors such as effort, task difficulty and luck while their counterparts from urban secondary schools did not attribute success to luck. The results show that students in secondary schools attribute success and failure to four main variables: ability, effort, task difficulty and luck. The results concur with those by Farrha Addiba [14] in Pakistan where she found out that high achieving students attribute success to ability and effort. This again supports Weiner's theory of attribution [4].

Lack of effort was found to be the main cause of failure among students. During the focus group discussions, they all agreed that one needs to sweat if they want to pass or perform well during class tests and examinations. About 80% of the students did not agree that luck is a cause of success in learners. They contended that it leads to laziness because attributing success to luck reduces chances or the probability of working extra hard in examinations as one would always assume luck might bail them out whether they worked hard or not. This is again consistent with Weiners' theory that attribution affects students' motivation and odds of hard work or the opposite [15].

Most students attributed failure to lack of effort with 71.0% as an internal factor seconded by task difficulty with 22.6% and bad luck with 6.5%. Some students attributed success to both ability and effort and some combined task difficulty and bad luck as causes of failure. It was discovered that students attributed success to task difficulty because some tests and examinations are very tough such that most students fail but sometimes a test may be simple and they pass. This was elaborated during the focus group discussions and interviews with the students. Lack of effort was given many points as a main cause of failure in students' tests and examinations.

This collaborates with research findings by Brown [16] that attribution has an impact to an individual's motivation because it affects one's perceptions about ability and capability.

Students who were sampled for the study, especially from rural secondary schools, attributed success largely to ability and effort. For example, students from Nankumba CDSS said that for one to pass in a test or examinations they need to work hard, they said that to promote hard work the government strives to provide reading textbooks for students to study and perform well during their assessments. They also reiterated that some individuals have inborn intelligence but that alone cannot help but should be coupled with hard work. They further referenced that intelligence alone is not enough but should also be nurtured by good learning resources and above all else hard work. One could see them justified because most rural schools in Malawi are under-resourced compared to urban counterparts. Most learners also sampled from the bottom ten passing list still mentioned luck and task difficulty no wonder one could be tempted to conclude that the attribution theory is valid and applicable in Malawian secondary schools. This is in line with Ames' findings among mathematics students in Brazil that showed that students with high ability attribute their success and failure to internal factors as compared to low achieving mathematics students who attributed their success and failure to external factors [17].

The Figure 1 is the graphic representation of the findings from the students regarding their attribution of success. Effort was highly attributed to as compared to other variables. Luck was least attributed in as far as success was concerned. However, this differed from school to school and student by student depending on their mental and intellectual abilities. This study found that the attribution theory suggested by Weiner is valid in Malawi, however, other factors which were discovered by this study such as interest, teacher influence, language mastery, parental influence and peer pressure need to be explored and see if they affect students' performance and motivation.

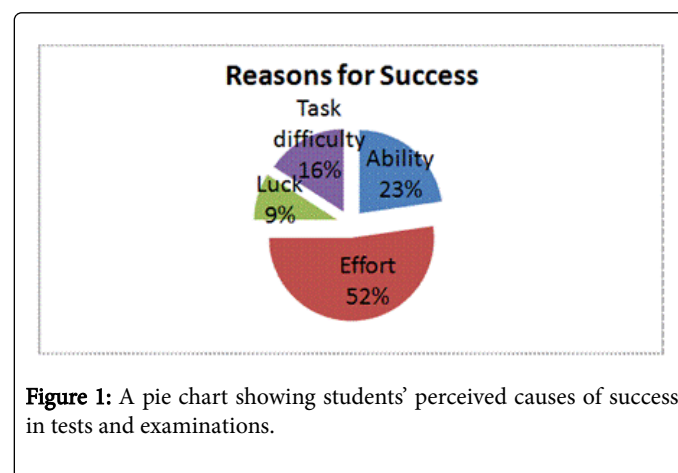


Figure 1: A pie chart showing students' perceived causes of success in tests and examinations.

In the Figure 2, most students attributed failure to lack of effort with 71.0% as an internal factor seconded by task difficulty with 22.6% and bad luck with 6.5%. Some students attributed success to both ability and effort and some combined task difficulty and bad luck as causes of failure. It was observed that students attributed success to task difficulty because some tests and examinations are very tough such that most students fail but sometimes a test may be simple and they pass. This was elaborated during the focus group discussions and interviews with the students.

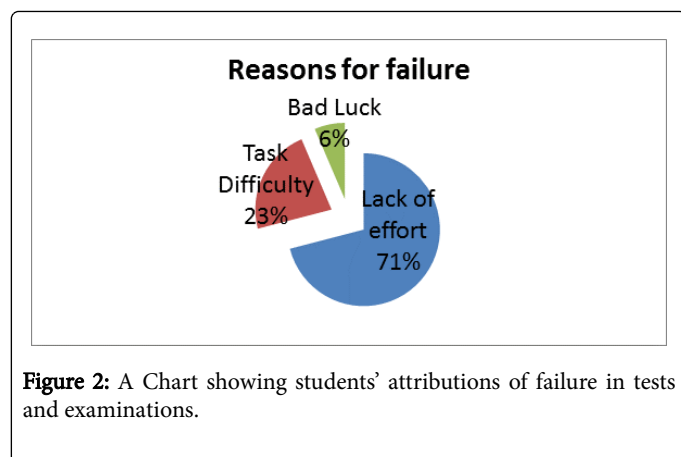


Figure 2: A Chart showing students' attributions of failure in tests and examinations.

Attribution and motivation

Through the focus group discussions, interviews and teacher questionnaires, the study found that both teachers and students know that whatever they attribute to be the cause of their success and failure also affects motivation, they contended that the attributions which individuals make get established in the minds and as a result one cannot work hard. Teachers pointed out that if learners attribute failure to external factors, they cannot concentrate because they would not know that internal factors are crucial. This supports a similar study conducted by Manzoni [18] who found out that students will be more persistent at academic tasks if they attribute their academic successes to either internal, unstable, factors over which they have control (for example, effort) or internal, stable factors over which they have little control but which may sometimes be disrupted by other factors (for example, ability disrupted by occasional bad luck). Therefore, one way to change our motivation is to change our beliefs and attributions. Intrinsic motivation which normally comes from within an individual is very important in as far as learning and success is concerned. It is through internal attributions that intrinsic motivation could be enhanced because it affects self-esteem and one's believe in themselves. On the other hand, it can be argued that the teachers' role is to help learners develop external motivation through various forms of reinforcement such that this influences the learners to start to be intrinsically motivated [10]. Thus through reinforcements and encouragements students start to believe in themselves. All educators as well as parents should ensure that students know that it is only hard work that make individuals pass or perform well in tests and examinations [16].

The study further unveiled that there is a direct relationship between attribution and students' motivation which eventually translates into individual's self-esteem, achievement and performance especially among adolescent students who perceive current successes and failures as predictors of their future outcomes in the adult world [19]. According to the responses given by all teachers from the five schools, most students attribute failure to lack of effort followed by task difficulty. All teachers conceded that attribution has a direct influence on students' motivation.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study it could be concluded that students differed in the perceived causal explanations of their success and failure. The comparison of high achievers and low achievers showed that high achievers attributed their success and failure mostly to effort and ability. On the other hand, low achievers associated their test and examinations outcomes with luck and task difficulty. The study also unraveled that there is a direct relationship between attribution and motivation. It was observed that attribution theory is closely associated with the concept of motivation, determining that a person's attributions for success or failure ultimately affect the amount of effort he or she will exert on that activity in the future. Ultimately these attributions predict future achievement behaviours.

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