# Factors Leading to Student Teachers' Success or Low Academic Performance

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## Abstract:

This study aimed to investigate factors that are leading to student teachers' success, or on the other hand, to low academic performance. It focused on four major thematic areas, including 1) Study planning and time management, 2) Relationship with others, 3) Resources, and 4) Motivation and status of the teaching profession. This study took place at the Eritrea Institute of Technology, College of Education, in Eritrea. A participatory qualitative research design with thematic focus group discussions was used. Three focus group discussions with 24 students were conducted. The data was discussed in the research meetings, arranged, and each researcher was given one thematic area for further analysis. The analysis was conducted as a deductive content analysis where the four themes were leading the analysis process. The study shows that study planning and time management is one of the key elements in successful studies. Additionally, access to relevant study resources facilitates learning. Relationship with the other students, with the teachers and family is either supporting or negatively affecting to the academic performance. This study recommends that teacher education institutions should study more the reasons for their students' both low and high academic performance. This needs multi-stakeholder approach, meaning engagement and co-operation of parents, teachers, students and governmental and non-governmental administrations.

## Introduction

It is a commonly known fact that education is central to the development of societies and nations. Acquiring knowledge, developing skills, engaging in diverse academic activities, which develop creativity, conducting research and creating innovations are needed in all fields of human life. All nations and countries rely on the quality and versatility of its human capital to maintain its strengths (Alexander, Salmon & Alexander, 2015). The way of conducting education affects to the prospective graduates' possibilities to be successful in the competitive markets of the global economy and human capital development. In the agenda of the Government of Eritrea, the education is given a top priority in the development. Therefore, the Ministry of Education focuses on ensuring equity, quality and relevance of education for all. The quality of teacher education is one of the cornerstones of effective educational system. The way of organizing teacher education affects the society as the prospective teachers are preparing for their further studies and employments.

It is recognised that the teachers and the learning environment have a major impact on explaining students' motivation on attending classes and gaining good learning outcomes (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Pintrich, 2004). Teachers are the key actors in creating a learning environment that enhances and sustains the students' motivation and engages them in the learning process. High competence of teacher, students' interest and clear guidelines from the teacher are enhancing the students' engagement with each other, their possibility to complete class and homework, and other curricular and co-curricular and other constructive activities. Yet, studies in various countries have demonstrated that many teachers rely on controlling teaching strategies, which are guided by their underlying personal beliefs about what they think that motivates students (Turner, 2010; Turner et al., 2009; Pelletier et al., 2002). Moreover, interdisciplinary approach in teaching creates a team spirit and students are enriched with their educational experience. This also fosters lifelong learning skills. Teaching which concentrates on discipline and is based on traditional methodologies might not result in best learning experiences (Jones, 2010).

There is a wide range of types of social support that enhance the teaching and learning process, and facilitates the improvement and engagement. According to the research findings by Ryder et al. (2017), peer assisted learning and tutoring help students in their learning process. These help the students to form essential linkages between different resources and needs in studies. They also have a positive impact on learning and performance by increasing the quality of learning and the confidence of the students. However, the students need to have interest and readiness to gain different educational experiences such as physical knowledge, intercultural knowledge, civic knowledge, and ethnic reasoning (American Federation of Teachers Higher Education, 2011).

This study has been conducted in a college environment where a variety of traditional and non-traditional teaching methodologies are used. Moreover, the college is hosting students from different socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic groups. Many of the students have demanding life circumstances and challenges which are hindering their full academic performance. As educators, we wanted to find out what are the key-elements to facilitate the academic success of the students and, on the other hand, what are the main obstacles for it.

## Research questions and research objectives

This research aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge of student performance in the field of teacher education. Specifically, the study had two main research questions, including:

The main research question 1:*What are the factors that contribute to the students' success in their education in the teacher education?*

Sub-questions:

1. How does study planning and time management affect the students' achievement in learning?

2. How does the relationship between different people and stakeholders influence the students' performance?

The main research question 2:*What are the describing factors for students' academic performance in the teacher education?*

Sub-questions:

1. What are the factors that promote students' motivation towards learning?

2. What is the role of different resources in facilitating learning?

3. That are the challenges that hinder the students' success?

This research aimed to meet the following objectives:

1. To investigate and identify the main reasons and factors leading either to the students' success or low academic performance in the College of Education,
2. To identify the students' challenges in learning,
3. To create awareness among the college students about the reasons of low academic performance, and
4. To improve the quality of education by empowering cooperation and collaboration among the students, teachers and other relevant stakeholders.

## Methodology

### *Data gathering*

This study was conducted as a participatory qualitative research with features of action research (Whitehead & McNiff 2006; Hine 2013) where the

main data-gathering method was focus-groups discussions (FGD's). The discussions were conducted under four different thematic areas which were 1) Study Planning and time management, 2) Relationship with other people, 3) Resources and 4) Motivation and status of the teaching profession. Prior to the data gathering, the data-gathering instrument was developed. The tool included the presentation of each thematic area and guidance for the facilitator to conduct the discussions. One researcher was in charge of drafting the first version of the data gathering tool and later on, the tool was discussed among all the researchers and adjusted by adding some beneficial direct questions. The data-gathering tool was tested within the pilot study where seven participants (n=7), one facilitator and two observers attended. After the pilot study, three FGD sessions, each with 8 participants (n=eight, N=24) were organized. Participants were purposively selected. The participants were student teachers from diploma and degree programmes of teacher education. The student participants were assigned to the groups according to their academic performance, as following:

- Group one, 8 participants (n=8) with high academic performance
- Group two, 8 participants (n=8) with low academic performance
- Group three, 8 participants (n=8), mixed group both the students with high and low performance

The facilitator led each focus-group session, and an observer and a note-taker recorded the discussions. The length of one session was approximately two hours. Each session included the presentation of the research, group discussion, conclusive presentation and conclusive discussion.


## Data analysis

The data was collected in written form in each session by the observer/note-taker and later on, the notes were transcribed by word processor. Finally, the data from different FDG's were combined together. The data was discussed in the research meetings, arranged, and each researcher was given one thematic area for further analysis. The analysis was conducted as a deductive content analysis where the four themes were leading the analysis process. The data was categorized under the four themes and further categorized to sub-themes accordingly. The entire research group discussed each category and the interpretation was agreed upon.


## Ethical considerations

High ethical principles were followed in each step of this research. In the initial stage, the researchers acknowledged that the research topic itself is very sensitive and touches deeply on the students' abilities, attitudes, skills and knowledge. Therefore, the methodological questions were profoundly reflected to the research groups' formation. The researchers chose to form the focus groups in a manner that would not reveal the students' possibly low

performance. Rather, the study setting was seen as a possibility to empower the students in their educational path.

In the beginning of each focus group session, the facilitator explained the aims, objectives and methodologies of this study to the participants. The participation was voluntarily, and the anonymity of each individual student was guarded during the entire process.

Good research ethics was followed also in the data-analysis and the interpretation phase. The research group was having several meetings to discuss the methodological choices.

## Results

The results of this research are categorized under four main categories, which are: 1) Study planning and time management, 2) Relationship with others, 3) Resources, and 4) Motivation and status of teaching profession. The main categories are presented in the Figure 1.
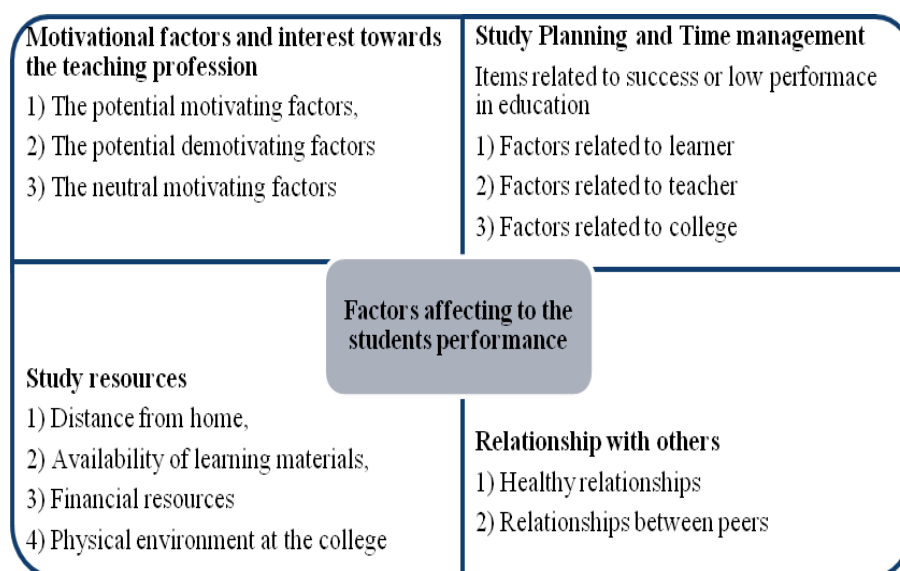


**Figure 1.** The Main Research Result Categories of Factors Affecting the Student Performance

### *Study planning and time management*

The data on study planning and time-management could be categorized into the factors that either contribute to the students' success, or affect the students' low performance in education. According to the data, study planning and time management are the key elements of academic success. The plan for studies should be individually tailored and based on the interests and abilities of the student. The level of a subject's difficulty guide the plan making. The students' prior knowledge and performance from earlier studies affect how they are able to plan and manage their studies. Moreover, a student who has been attending to the class regularly and on time, has

potentially better possibilities to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the current theme to be learnt and acquire new skills. This is supported by constant interaction with peers, teachers and the college community. Interestingly, class attendance was found to be higher if the teacher has good pedagogical skills, good content knowledge and if he or she acts in a professional manner. The students reported that class discipline; including punctuality, self-regulation and high educational standards, support their attendance and performance in their studies. The factors related to study planning and time management are presented in the Table 1 by describing how the student, the teacher or the college contribute to these.

**Table 1**. Study Planning and Time Management

| Study Planning and Time Management | | |
|---|---|---|
| Actor | Contributes to the successful performance | Affects to low performance in education |
| Student | • Time plan which is based on students' interest and abilities<br>• Proper use of time plan and effective time management<br>• Regular attendance to classes<br>• Ability to make linkage between prior knowledge and current learning task | • Mismatch of plan with individual interest and ability<br>• Unwise use of time and lack of skills on time management<br>• Irregular attendance<br>• Gap between previous knowledge and current learning area |
| Teacher | • Attraction in teacher's pedagogical skills and content knowledge | • Teacher's inadequate teaching skills |
| College | • Discipline<br>• Flexible attendance | • Indiscipline<br>• Forced attendance |

## *Relationship with others*

The data shows that the students' relationship with family, teachers, administrators and peers in the college are crucial for their academic success. These relationships could be categorized into 1) Healthy and supportive relationships and 2) Relationships between peers.

Healthy and stable relationships strengthen cooperation between different actors, reduce stress and promote self-confidence and self-esteem of the students. On the other hand, conflicts with parents and friends cause psychological unrest, stress and tensions. This potentially affects to the level of motivation and in the end, might lead to the lower academic performance of a student. The concepts "college-like family" and "family-like college" explain the unseparated roles of relationship with others and represent, how the college community as well as family might affect to the studies. Additionally, active participation in the student groups promotes individual students' success. A student who engages with the group and participates actively in the

discussions, seems to have better possibilities for learning than those who only study alone.

Positive peer-relations create opportunity for the learners to share their experiences and knowledge, collaborate with each other and gain better academic results. Interestingly, the relationship with peers might have both positive and negative impacts. Healthy relationships are the ones where the students share common goals and purposes. Friendships with peer-students should be built by sharing similar hopes, interests, ambitions and future dreams. The students found it important that they are not accepting his or herpeer's ideas blindly but they rather should critically reflect the ideas of each other. Contradictory, passively accepting the peers' ideas might be a reason for failure and dismissal at college. Negative peer influence results in bad habits, unaccepted behaviour and can cause negligence in the studies.

## *Resources*

In this study, the data on the importance of the study resources were categorized into four different sub-categories, which were 1) Distance from home, 2) Availability of learning materials, 3) Financial resources, and 4) Physical environment at the college.

The data showed that distance from home might have eithera positive or negative impact on the students' success, depending on the individual situation. Short distance from home to the college might enable better family support. On the contrary, long distance from home might make the students to spend their spare time in the college when it might be spent effectively for studying. Additionally, the data showed that trips to home might cause overspend of money and time, homesickness and stress as at home, the students are expected to contribute to the family duties. In the cases where family members are educators, the visits to home might have a more positive impact to the studies.

The availability or lack of learning materials have an impact to the students' performance. Learning materials, access to Internet or possibility to use IT equipment might ease the studies. Different resources facilitate the learning and support achieving personal study goals. Access to Internet gives opportunity to seek even larger amount of information within a short time. On the other hand, Internet connection might in some cases lead to misuse of social media, which in turn might affect negatively to the studies. Additionally, slow Internet connection and electricity blackouts where mentioned as factors that slow down the studies. The students shared also their experience of lack of reference books. Inadequate number of books in the library seemed to lead to hiding or misplacing them, or fighting about the books. The students also explained that some of the materials were outdated and old, and they thereby suggested that the materials should be renewed. All kind of improper use of different learning resources thus weakens the academic performance.

Financial resources, when used wisely, promote learning and help to be successful in the studies. Similarly, lack of funds restricts access to supportive

educational materials. On the contrary, excessive financial resources might cause nonessential use of them.

The physical environment might have an impact on academic success. Well-equipped college, dormitories, and well-planned placement of students to the dormitories, positively affect to the student achievement. The students reported that they have benefitted from the recent dormitory placements where they share the dormitory with their friends and students from the same department. Contradictory, the previous experiences of placement where the students were randomly assigned to dormitories resulted in some unwanted behaviour among them. The students also highlighted that the existing infrastructure in the campus is not comfortable for their education. For example, poor physical structures of the buildings might cause disturbance because of sounds and noise.

## *Motivation and status of the teaching profession*

In this study the motivational factors and interest towards the teaching profession could be categorized into three different main categories, which where 1) The potential motivating factors, 2) The potential demotivating factors and 3) The neutral motivating factors.

According to the data, the teachers' pedagogical skills motivate the students to attend to the classes and that in turn results in positive learning outcomes. Moreover, the teachers' behaviour might positively influence in the attendance of the students. Learner-centred pedagogy and interesting assignments, such as fieldwork, keeps the students active and motivated for their studies. The students' support to each other remains as an important motivating factor, too. This peer-support is delivered as collaboration between students, knowledge sharing and supportive behaviour among the students. Unfortunately, there are also several potential demotivating factors which might hinder the students' success in their academic performance. Lack of various resources and support from the family, knowledge gaps and several infrastructural issues might limit the students' full potential in their performance. Moreover, lack of motivation was also explained by the unwillingness to study in the teacher education. In some cases, the students indicated that they did not choose this field of study by their own interest which might cause demotivation towards the studies. The current process of admission where the students are placed to the colleges without their personal interest is clearly not fruitful in the process of meeting the learning achievements. In some cases, the students are not intrinsically motivated to come to the college regularly.

As a part of the motivating factors, one could also find the quality of education and training. Most of the instructors at the College of Education are graduate assistants and even though they are highly motivated and committed to their work, they would need additional courses and upgrading programs to be more empowered in their position. The students would expect that their instructors are highly qualified and experienced, and they find it hard to learn under the guidance of the graduate assistants. Moreover, some of the teachers

follow traditional teacher-centred pedagogical methodologies or they are authoritarian in nature, which demotivates the students.

As a neutral motivating factor, the students mentioned their family background meaning that the family's socio-economic and educational background might either courage the youth for better academic results or, in the case where the family is not supporting their education, hinder the youth to gain education.

## Discussion

### *Study planning and time management*

In this study, the students' study planning and time management were found as some of the key elements for high academic performance. The study showed that successful students did the planning in the beginning of the academic year by reflecting their abilities and interests in contrast to the subject difficulty. Their academic performance was based on individual competencies, confidence and prior knowledge. Like this study, Conley (2012) found out that previous knowledge and skills relate to academic success and employment competences. Moreover, our study showed that the students who attended the classes regularly had better opportunities to acquire complete information, skills and techniques. This concerns their possibilities to interact with the teachers, peers and college community, too. (Ryder et al., 2017; Coronas et al, 2015; American Federation of Teachers Higher Education, 2011.)Within this study, the teachers' pedagogical skills, subject knowledge and professional behaviour attracted the students to attend the classes. This was supported by similar findings made by Hadar and Brody (2010). Moreover, similar to Malin, Bragg and Hackmann's study (2017), class discipline, study ethics and punctuality were found as factors to support the students' learning and career readiness. Regarding our study, a successful student seems to be able to develop intellectual abilities, including higher level thinking skills, critical inquiry, creative thinking, problem solving, independent learning and technology assisted learning. The American Federation of Teachers Higher Education (2011) similarly reports these factors.

### *Relationship with others*

The present study stated that the student's various relationships with others are crucial for success. Healthy and stable relationships strengthen cooperation, reduces stress and promotes self- confidence and self-esteem. Similar findings were found in other studies as well (Muijs & Reynold, 2015; Coronas et al., 2015) and they especially highlight the students' possibilities for holistic development in relationship with others. Our study contributes to the understanding that well-functioning relationships help students to perform better in their studies (Fincham & Rhodes,2005),whereas conflict with parents

and friends causes psychological problems and stress which in turn lowers the motivation.

Creating a "school like family" atmosphere helps the students to meet the academic objectives. Students who are encouraged to actively engage in group studies and discussions are more likely to be creative and reflective. This also encourages them share their knowledge with others and helps to perform better in complex tasks, be responsible and take a leading role in the group. Several other researchers have found the same in their studies. (Bryman, 2013; Potter, Cooke & Balthazard,2000; Gladstein, 1984.)In addition, positive peer relations create opportunities for the learners to share their experiences and knowledge, collaborate and achieve higher academic results. This positively impacts to their academic performance as also Ryder et al. (2017) and Kozulin et al.(2006)have found out.

## Resources

This study attempted to create a greater understanding of how different resources contribute to one's academic success. It was found that resources are a complex issue, and both the lack of resources and access to the resources might have either positive or negative impact depending on how they are used study-wise. The present study is in line with the previous studies which show that resources and academic performance have a correlating relationship. It was also revealed that organizational resources and culture, power relations, human resources, technical support, reward systems, and general atmosphere are in relationship with the students' academic performance.(Robbins, 2004;Potter, Cooke &Balthazard,2000.) Moreover, clear directions, objectives, and trustful, healthy and safe environment as well as group resources arguably lead to better academic outcomes (Andriopoulos &Lowe, 2000; Brand, 1998; Lewicke & Bunker, 1996).

## Motivation

Within this study, we found out that the students' motivation towards learning can be supported in various ways. Teachers who are performing learner-centred pedagogy enhance the students' motivation and giving interesting assignments. This enhances the student engagement, which was also found as one of the motivating factors for learning by Hornstra et al.(2016). Moreover, as Hadar &Brody(2011) have stated, the teacher educators have a possibility to motivate the students by exposing them to different and new ideas, methods and theories. Muijs & Reynold(2015) have also mentioned that the teachers' behaviour is among the strongest direct influencers regarding the students' achievements. The teacher's own motivation towards their work is another essential component to enhance the classroom effectiveness(Carson & Chase, 2009). As it is examined in other studies, we also found that the students' learning outcomes are highly dependent on the quality of instruction, teaching approaches and the teacher's

motivation (Butler & Shibaz, 2014; Thoonen et al., 2011). Furthermore, the study by Bernaus and Gardner (2008) reports that teacher motivation is highly related to the students' motivation as motivated teacher tend to utilize motivating teaching strategies as well. Contradictory, other attributes of teachers, such as autonomy or a controlling behaviour (see Radel et al., 2010), were not significantly present in this study and thus need to be further researched.

# Recommendations

Based on the study, it is recommended that teacher education institutions themselves would study more the reasons for their students' both low and high academic performance. This needs multi-stakeholder approach, meaning engagement and co-operation of parents, teachers, students and governmental and non-governmental administrations. Moreover, it is recommended that continuous professional trainings are conducted among the teacher educators as this has a direct impact on the pedagogical approaches and teaching strategies the teachers utilize, which again relates to the students' motivation towards their studies. It is further recommended that the teacher education institutions should have strong guidance and counselling services as the students' awareness of their performance, study skills, roles and responsibilities seem to have a direct effect on the students' success in their studies.

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