

EFFECTS OF ATTITUDES OF ACADEMICALLY TALENTED STUDENTS ON PERFORMANCE: AN ABILITY OR DISABILITY?

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Abstract

Academic performance is a function of many interrelated variables including inherent study efforts, modes of teaching school environment and family related factors. Academically talented students are often expected to perform and maintain high academic standards. However, students may sometimes be made under achievers. This study specifically assessed academic performance of the academically talented students their attitudes towards teachers and effects of attitude on their performance. The three variables were discriminated further on the basis of gender, school type and age. The main factor affecting talented student's performance was also determined. Results indicated that most of academically talented students had positive attitudes towards teachers, which significantly ($P < 0.05$) influenced their academic performance. It was revealed that gender, age and type of school had significant influence on the student's attitudes which ultimately influence their overall academic performance. Student's attitudes were found to be a function of 14 variables which were categorized into student - teacher relationships student's academic inputs, group discussion and student workload. It has now been revealed that academic performance is related to student's attitudes towards their teachers. It is recommended that schools should dedicate part of their investment on inculcating and fostering positive student attitudes through routine and regular legislation of guidance and counseling and providing an enabling environment for their academically talented students.

Key words: ability, attitudes, disability, education, innovation, students, talents, performance.

Introduction

Education is increasingly gaining prominence as one of the most important subject in Africa. One of the overriding United Nations (UN) Millennium goals is the provision of education for all by the year 2015. Many countries of the world have invested huge sums of their budgets to enhance attainment of education by the citizens. In Kenya, education is fundamental in the development of human persons and has been viewed principally in light of a fundamental human right (Kyalo, Osano, Maundu, and Kipkemboi, 2006) as well as being the cradle of mankind. Therefore providing enabling environment for students in schools remains a major and a fundamental issue among policy designers. Quality in the education system in Kenya is still tied intimately to attainment of the top most echelon in the education system. This will involve learning to the university level.

One way in which success of students is determined in Kenyan educational system is, the students' performance which is based on evaluation of end course exams. Ultimately, the performance of students after eight years in primary school is the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and after four in secondary schools is the Kenya Certificate of

Secondary Education (KCSE). As Kamugisha, Tanui, Koros, Ondieki and Simiyu (2005) put it, the success of students in education in Kenya follows, the notion of “all or nothing” principle. The fundamental behind the principle is that, a student is academically able to go through the system successfully aforementioned examinations or one cannot manage them and thus will not progress beyond certain threshold education points. In such scenario, and taking cognizance that certain students easily go through the examinations while others are far unsuccessful, one fundamental question arises; Is the ability of students to successfully go through the system intertwined in their academic talents, sheer luck or hard work?. This therefore brings to the fore the issues of academic talents among students.

Students either have the academic talents or they lack it. One core factor is that students with academic talents find it easier to acquire knowledge with much ease and put less effort in reading complex subjects with higher degree of understanding. On the other hand, less academically oriented students have to endure more hours trying to grasp relatively easy concepts in relation to the academically talented colleagues (Castellano, 1994). It is imperative to note that, an individual student through personal effort and teacher instruction will, in many circumstances, achieve good academic performance even if the student is not academically talented. Thus attitudes that students have towards their teachers may have influence on what and how they learn from them.

According to Watson and Ashton, (1995) each person is unique, has unique gifts and problems, is subject to unique influences, promoting certain aspects of learning and inhibiting others. Gallagher (1983) stated that United States have schools tailored towards developing the student’s talent. Recognizing the unique needs of students with high potential, classes have been developed to help students develop their cognitive (thinking) such as logical reasoning, problem solving, critical thinking and creative thinking. At present, the Kenyan Education lacks such provisions for the academically talented hence their gifts may lie either unnoticed or unutilized.

Kamunge Report (1988) noted that, in every society there are especially gifted and talented persons whose special gifts and talents begin to show at a fairly early age. It recommended that such people should be identified early, given encouragement, adequate challenges and facilities to direct their training into fields that enhance overall development of the nation. This report, however noted that apart from regular formal education, training and research programmes for identification and development of specially gifted and talented individuals should be carried out. Although the working party proposed that such students should be identified and their gifts and talents developed in specific schools; such recommendations have not been implemented. Further to that, Koech Report, (1999), Totally Integrated Quality Education and Training, (TIQET) lamented that the gifted and talented individuals in Kenya have not been given due recognition.

A major challenge that the academically talented individuals experience is lack of motivation. Watson and Ashton (1995) cited that the most serious enemy of learning is boredom. There are marked differences among the gifted and talented persons in their interest, achievement, motivation and attachment. A programme, teacher or situation that is viewed with disfavour may develop unfavourable attitudes within the learner. Therefore, attitudes of the academically talented students should be established in order to provide them with proper programmes that enhance motivation.

One of the prime factors causing boredom is lack of ownership of what an individual does. Everyone’s needs are different. The needs of the academically talented students have not yet been attended to specifically. This is specifically missing in the Kenyan education system at present. Effort is lacking in the identification of academically talented students, organization, presentation and provision of the right curriculum for this exceptional persons.

Purpose of the Research

The study sought to establish the attitudes of the academically talented students towards their teachers, which would be useful in determining the relationships between the performance and the attitudes.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The study was based on the social learning theory by Bandura (1986) and cognitive dissonance of Festinger (1957). The basic tenet of social learning theory is that most important parts of individual's behaviour are learned from other persons in society – family, friends, teachers and culture. Bandura considers modeling to be an important demonstration of the role of cognition in learning. Teachers and parents are seen as models for students to imitate. Models that are imitated should be appropriate and friendly. More powerful models are more likely to be imitated than the less powerful ones and the consistency of a model's behaviour is seen to be a factor likely to be imitated. In the social learning theory view, a person will develop an adequate personality only if he or she is exposed to good models and reinforced for appropriate behaviour. This will influence future learning behaviour.

Besides modeling, attitudes of students towards their teachers play a great role in the learning process. Attitudes are defined as a mental predisposition to act that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour. The attitudinal consequences of engaging in counter-attitudinal behaviour have been studied intensively within the framework of cognitive dissonance theory. This theory, first proposed by Festinger (1957), is perhaps the best known among a group of theories which deal with the effects of inconsistencies between beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Cognitive consistency theories assume that such inconsistency is a source of tension and/or discomfort, and that the individual will therefore prefer where possible to reduce or eliminate the inconsistency.

Methodology of Research

This study relied on ex post facto design. Ex post facto designs are normally used to systematically gather factual quantifiable information necessary for decision-making. According to Kothari (2004), such designs are efficient methods of collecting descriptive data regarding the characteristics of populations, current practices and conditions or needs. They also help gather information from large cases by employing use of samples hence cutting down on costs. Given the above stated attributes, ex post facto research design was adopted in this study in order to capture descriptive data from selected samples and generalize the findings to the populations from, which the sample was selected.

Sample Selection and Size

The research sample consisted of 338 students which was 30% of the total number of students in the five divisions. The schools within Keiyo District were proportionally selected from the five divisions. Four additional schools, which represented schools with special needs, were added to the initial 17 schools using purposive sampling.

Academically talented students were selected through stratified sampling technique. This was based on the class lists of the students' performance kept by the head teachers in school administrative units. The researcher ensured that equal representation was used for all the school sampled. In such case, the top 17 students from each school were selected as respondents in this study.

Equal numbers of Form 3 and Form 4 were selected for the study. The choice of the above was based on the fact that the students have been in the school much longer and are more knowledgeable about the teachers that they interact with than the Form one and two. Thus the research relied on familiarity of the students to the school environment.

Results of Research

The study sought to establish the attitudes of the academically talented students towards their teachers, which would be useful in determining the relationships between the performance and the attitudes. The attitudes were ranked using the Likert scale ranking. Analyses of the attitudes were done using the respondents 54 items of the questionnaires. The findings were as follows;

Overall Attitudes of Academically Talented Students towards the Teachers

The study sought to establish the overall attitudes of the academically talented students towards the teachers with a view of getting the relationships between the attitudes of the students and the overall performance. Majority of the academically talented students had a positive attitude (58.9%) towards their teachers. Students with negative attitudes towards their teachers were moderate in proportion (33.5%), however, the proportion of students with neutral attitudes were significantly ($p < 0.05$) lower than the rest. There was a statistical significant difference in the attitudes of the students towards teachers (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, $Z = 48.154$, $p = 0.000$). This therefore implies that most of the students interviewed in this study were having generally positive attitudes towards their teachers. The overall attitudes of the students towards their teachers are depicted in Figure 1.

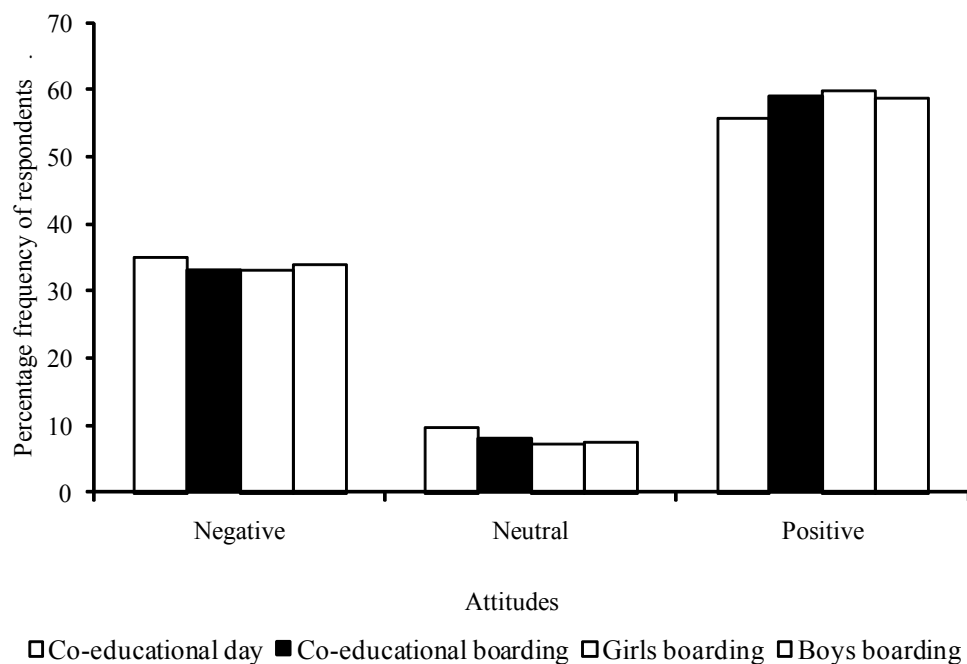


Figure 1: Attitudes of academically talented students towards the teachers from various types of schools.

Gender Differences in Attitudes of Academically Talented Students towards Teachers

Attitudes of the students toward the teachers were not homogenous prompting the researcher to test the difference between male and female using statistical methods. The result showed that less number of females (31.2%) had negative attitudes towards teachers compared to males (39.2%). Females had generally more positive attitudes (59.4%) when compared to the male students (50.1%). There were significant differences in the gender attitudes towards the teachers ($\chi^2 = 8.712$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.037$). Neutral attitudes between males and females were not significantly different ($p > 0.05$).

Differences in attitudes of academically talented students towards teachers among types of schools

The attitudes of students towards teachers were also compared for the various types of schools in order to establish the distribution of attitudes among the students from the various types of schools. According to the findings, negative attitudes were recorded in 34.9% of the students in co-educational day schools, 33.2% of the students in co-educational boarding, 33.0% in girls boarding and in 33.8 of the students in boys boarding. Neutral attitudes were recorded in 9.5%, 7.9%, 7.1% and 7.5% in co-educational day schools, co-educational boarding schools, girls boarding and boys boarding respectively. Positive attitudes of students towards teachers were recorded more in girls boarding (59.9%) followed by co-educational boarding (58.9%) then boys boarding (58.7%), and finally in co-educational day schools. The differences in attitudes of students toward teachers were significantly different ($\chi^2 = 14.859$, $df = 6$, $P = 0.021$) among the various types of schools. The results of the attitudes of students towards teachers from various schools are presented in Figure 2.

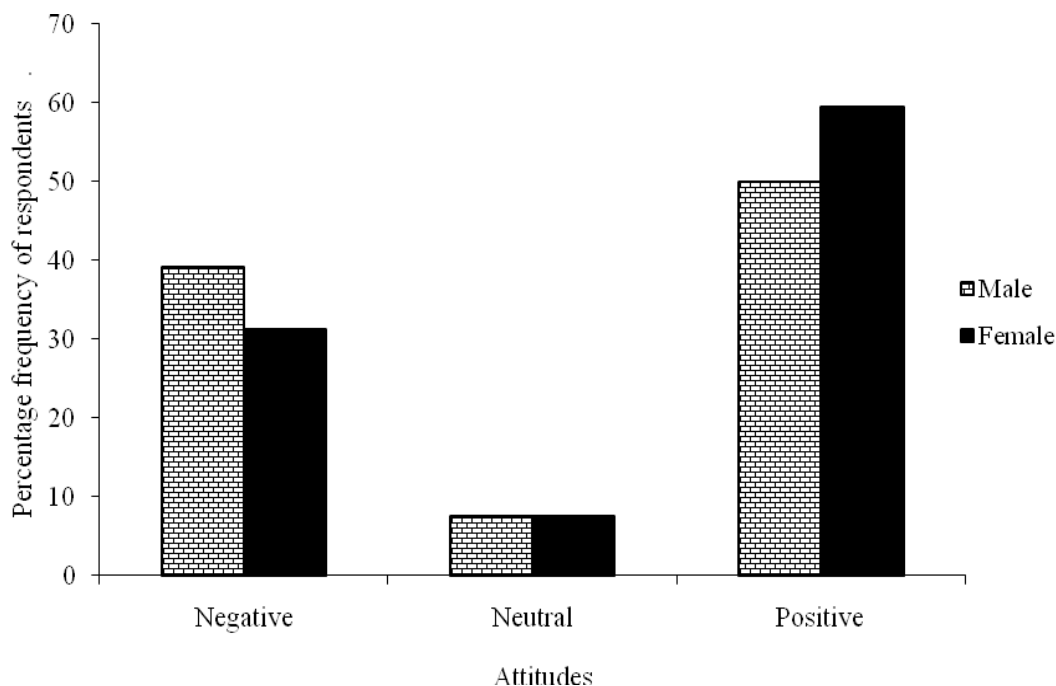


Figure 2: Gender differences in attitudes of academically talented students towards their teachers.

Discussion

This study concludes that *first*, the findings concur with studies by McCoach and Siegle (2001) who reported similar findings among two separate profiles of gifted students; one set of students displayed negative attitudes towards teachers and school, while another set reported positive attitudes towards teachers and school. It is also overwhelming that a higher number of academically talented students with positive attitude still performed lower than others especially in the boys boarding, co-educational boarding and day, despite the fact that they understood very well about working hard to achieve good results. Attitude was found not to be the only variable that keeps students from doing well. This was explained well by the other factors other than attitude towards their teachers that were established to influence performance to a reasonable percentage. The study concurred with Lindgren (1980) who reported that some teachers become preoccupied with structure, control, rules and regulations. Such a preoccupation inevitably leads them to use strategies that are autocratic or authoritarian

On the other hand, there were significant differences in the performance and attitudes of academically talented students towards teachers. Students with negative attitudes towards teachers were not performing well as their counterparts with positive attitudes. This suggested that student's performance will largely be shaped by their relationships to their teachers. However, good academically the student is, the teachers' input into the student still remain paramount in shaping the future performance of the students.

Therefore, there was generally a significant relationship between performance and attitudes of female students. Girls with positive attitudes scored high marks while those with negative attitudes relatively scored lower marks. Girls with positive attitudes toward their teachers also scored higher than boys with similar attitudes toward teachers. These findings were in line with Emerick (1992) that there was an increasing and progressive tendency to express dislike for academic and social aspect of school in grades five, seven and nine. In many schools, the girls liked and valued academic activities more than boys, but these sex differences narrowed and disappeared later.

Furthermore, schools where students' attitudes toward teachers were positive exhibited significantly higher academic achievements than those where students had negative or neutral attitudes. This was the case in the girls and boys boarding schools in relation to the co-educational schools. Though among students in co-educational boarding schools, the performance of students was also dependant on the attitudes of students towards teachers, the number of students with negative attitudes affected the overall performance. Number of students with neutral attitudes reduced moderately as students performance improved whereas the number of students with positive attitudes increased with improved student performance. According to Schunk, 1984; Faccio and Zaina, 1991; Gross, 1992, and Jimenez, 1997, the possible explanation offered to account for this increase in the number of students with positive attitude as performance improved is the fact that when students trust their academic environment then they expect to succeed in it.

In girls' boarding school, performance was also a strong function of the students' attitudes. The number of the students with negative attitudes was smaller as did lower performers, however, the number of students increased remarkably with improvement of performance among students with positive attitudes. In boys' boarding schools, attitude and performance had a strong relationship. Highest number of students with negative attitudes performed lower than other students while the lowest number of students with positive attitude did not perform exceptionally well.

Fourthly, effects of Attitudes on Performance of Students between Classes showed that students from the two classes studied do not significantly differ as far as relationship between attitudes and performance is concerned. Among the students in both classes, form three and

form four, significant relationships existed between attitudes and performance. In both classes, the number of students with negative attitudes reduced with improvement of performance. This stand can be generally explained that the students at this stage possess similar biological and emotional characteristics.

Fifthly, based on effect of attitudes on performance of academically talented students according to Age the study showed that a student's attitude had a significant relationship with performance. Negative attitude was found to be related to age. Among students aged 16 – 18 years, frequency of students with negative attitudes was low and thus performance was higher. Similar trends were recorded among students aged above 18 years. However, students with both negative and neutral attitudes within the age brackets of 12 – 15 years were few to sustain any statistical comparisons.

These findings concur with Lindgren (1980) which explained that in primary grades, student's attitudes tend to be generally positive, but during the middle grades, something happens

Conclusion

This study concludes that *first*, the academically talented students as explained earlier differ from the "norm" Since they usually are ahead of the rest of students in the way they grasp the content that is taught. If information is repeated or slowed down, it results in boredom hence frustration. This will be expressed through disruptive behavior: Some lose interest in their daily work and seek refuge in excessive daydreaming and over - activity.

Secondly, on the effects of attitudes on performance, the study concludes that the attitudes towards teachers in girl's students determine more of their performance than attitudes of boys toward their teachers. This showed that the performance of the male students is not inherently related to their attitudes in comparison to females.

Thirdly, the study concludes that positive attitude towards the teacher improves performance among students across all types of schools.

Fourthly, the attitudes of students in all classes improved with improvement of performance. They also have more or less the same academic goals hence there is no much difference between them.

Fifthly, the study concludes that Age is a major determinant influence on the attitude of students to with majority of those in adolescence being affected.

Recommendations

Therefore the following recommendations were made:

- School head teachers should evaluate non-academically talented student and categorize them in relation to their attitudes toward teachers, which would be easier to inculcate proper attitudes among them.
- Special programmes for students with negative attitudes toward teachers which are in harmony with the basic principles of education, to be developed to ensure his/her capacities are developed.

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