

Factors Contributing to Academic Achievement and Moral Development: A Qualitative study

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Abstract

This study investigated factors that contribute to children's academic achievement and high moral values from parents' perspectives. Parents whose children are high achievers and show high religious commitment were interviewed. Analysis indicated that are "genetic", "commitment", "positive perception", and "religiosity" contribute to children's academic achievement. Implications for research are discussed.

Introduction

Many studies have been conducted to examine and understand the family factors that affect on how a child develops. This is not surprising because family is the first source for teaching children on how to behave and how to make decisions in life. One of the aspects that have received attention by many researchers is children's academic achievement (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). In a study by Christenson, Rounds, and Gorney (1992), family and environmental factors were found to affect students' achievement. The factors are parents' expectation and attribution, structure and learning, home effective environment, discipline, and parent involvement. Snowden and Christian (1999) investigated parenting behaviors that facilitate child development. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to determine the role played by parents. Their study shows that the parents who practiced authoritative parenting and fostered creativity, showed low levels of frustration, showed willingness to share control, recognized the value of play, and felt capable to teach their children efficiently and effectively. A longitudinal study that involved children at ages 9 and 10 years by Gottfried, Fleming, and Gottfried (1994) revealed that parental motivational practices have significant direct effects on academic intrinsic motivation, and indirect effects on subsequent motivation and achievement. The findings of these studies show the importance of parent's role in fostering their children development. In other words, positive parenting style is considered the most effective style for supporting children's academic achievement. Positive style has been associated with authoritative or democratic styles. Research shows that adolescents who describe their parents as warmth, fairness, and control are more likely to form positive attitudes towards school (Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989).

Besides academic achievement, children's moral development is also influenced by their parents. As shown in previous studies (Grusec, Goodnow & Kuczynski, 2000; White, 2000; White & Matawie, 2004), parents play a significant role in their children's moral thinking. Smetana (1999) asserted that parents' communications with their children are one aspect of children's social experiences that the children may use as a basis for developing moral knowledge. Smetana suggested that parents' explanation of rules and their responses towards moral violations facilitates children to think about their misbehaviors. Although parents are not the only source of influence on children's moral development, but usually are the first because they interact significantly with their children in contrast to other people.

Parents may influence their children's moral through a number of pathways. One of them is through teaching and instilling religiosity. Studies show that parents' moral and religious values that transmitted to their children enhance the children's morality. In a study by King and Furrow (2004), the researchers found that the influences of religious importance and participation on moral outcomes are mediated through interactions with adults, friends, and parents. The findings show that the crucial role that parents must play in instilling religiousness, which in turns will promote positive moral development. Thus, the goal of this study was to identify factors that contribute to their children's achievement and high religious commitment. Parents whose children achieve academically and show high religiosity were interviewed to explore their perspectives on what contribute to their children's achievement and high moral values. Our intention is to provide recommendations for practice to educators.

Method

A qualitative research involving interview was selected to gather the data. The method was chosen to understand parenting styles from naturalistic point of view.

Participants

Twenty parents were interviewed. They were chosen based on their children's academic achievement. High achiever children are characterized by their achievement in public examination. They are top scorers with at least 4A's. Children's morality and religiosity are characterized by their commitment to perform religious teachings and follow high level of morality.

Procedures

The data collection began by identifying the students who excel academically. Once they were identified, their parents were contacted.

Parents were asked whether they were interested to participate in the study. A number of 30 parents indicated that they were interested. The researchers made several visits to their home before the interview to make sure that they fulfill the criteria. As a result, only 20 parents were chosen. The qualitative data were coded based on the themes identified from the interviewed.

Results

A number of five themes based on the commonalities that appeared from the interviews. The themes are “diet”, “genetic”, “commitment”, “positive perception”, and “religiosity”. The themes that emerged from the study are explained in detail and supported by participants’ words.

Diet. All participants mentioned diet as one of the important factors that contribute to their children’s development. A participant said: “..I really take care of my children’s diet. I won’t allow them to take junk food; I also rarely buy readymade food because I prefer to cook at home. I also believe that raisins are good for their intellectual development”.

Genetic. Participants also believe that genetic factor influenced their children’s achievement and morality. One participant said: “*all my siblings achieve in their studies, I believe this contribute to my children’s success*”. Another participant said: “*I have 10 siblings and all of them are university graduates. My children also achieve like my siblings.*” Although genetic may not be a direct influential factor, it is undeniable that through modeling, the children learn to follow the suit.

Commitment. Parental commitment was found to be a crucial aspect that contributes to children’s achievement and their morality. Parents show their commitment towards their children’s education through many ways. Some parents said they must spend their time with the children for at least 10 hours a day. Parents also reported that they will check the children’s school bags every day. The parents hope that by doing this they ensure that the children did not leave homework undone or did not bring home prohibited materials. Apart from that, attending Parent-Teacher Association meeting is also considered important to show commitments.

Positive Perception. Parents indicated that they trust and maintain positive perceptions towards their children. Statements like “*I am proud of all my children*” and “*I am very satisfied with the achievement of children ...*” indicate that parents trust and have confidence in their children’s ability to succeed.

Religiosity. Parents in this study believe that religiosity is an important determinant of academic success and high morality. Most of them admitted that they are religious and they want their children to be religious too. Since participants of this study are Muslims, they indicated that daily prayer is a routine they impose on their children. Children are trained to perform prayers five times daily since the age of seven. Parents indicated that religiosity can be instilled in children before they were born. Some mothers said that they read verses of Quran every day, and fast on certain days during pregnancy. Parents also emphasize their children to read verses of Quran. *“I encourage my children to read Quran every day. My children have finished reading the holy book at the age of 8”.*

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative study show that there are five themes that contribute to children’s academic achievement and moral development. The themes are diet, genetic, commitment, positive perceptions, and religiosity. Although limited in scope due to nature of the research, these results generally support previous findings that show the crucial role of parents in their child development. During school age, children are still depending on their parents emotionally and financially. It is during this stage that parents may play their role to ensure their children’s achievement. In Muslim society, good parents are expected to know what their children eat. Homemade food is generally better than food cooked outside or readymade food. Thus, good parents usually prepare the food and choose what to eat or not to eat. The results of the interviews suggested that if parents provide good food for their children, their children will excel academically and have high level of morality.

The results also show that parents believe that genetic has an impact on their children’s academic achievement. Parents indicated that most of their extended family members also achieved in their studies. It may not be genetic factor that play a role, however, through imitation and role modeling, the children learn the importance of academic success. However, further research is needed to determine whether genetic contributes to success.

The influence of commitment and positive perception show the crucial role of parents in the educational development of their children. These two characteristics can only be achieved in functional families. Perhaps, a well function family is able to provide a positive climate to its members. According to Diaz (2003), the dynamic of communication and affective relationship determine family educational climate, which in turn influence academic results. Positive climate may also be influenced by parenting styles (democratic, authoritarian, or permissive), which in turn may or may not encourage parents to demonstrate positive perception and commitment.

Children who grew up in positive family environment not only achieve academically, they may also show high morality compared to children in less functional family.

The last determining factor is religiosity. As mentioned earlier, participants in this study are Muslims. According to their religious teaching, religious daily practices contribute to moral development as well as academic achievement. Therefore, the findings of this study need to be examined further in order to understand the relationship among moral development, religious practice, and academic achievement.

The findings of this study show the crucial roles that parents must play to help their children achieve academically and have high moral ground. This implies that educators and counselors need to work closely with parents in matters involving children development. Parents are the primary source of reference because they spend most of the times with the children in comparison to others. However, it is also importance for educators and counselors to consider children's family background because children, who were raised in single parent' family or remarriage family, may differ with children who grew up in intact families.

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