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SECRETS OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: STUDY ROUTINES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING PAKISTANI SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate their specific study habits, ambitions, routines, discipline, and strategies for staying at the top of their game. The target population for this study is students aged 13 to 16 in public and private secondary schools in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Data on 185 high achievers have been collected based on their school records and examination scores. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data, focusing on study schedules, revision practices, learning techniques, self-study, and self-directed study habits. Descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyze the data and present the results. Findings show that high achievers are more specific in their study tasks, have structured schedules, set clear goals, make rapid revisions, practice active learning strategies, and maintain balanced leisure activities. It was recommended that learner may remain flexible and apply different cognitive and psychological techniques to make your learning more fruitful.

Keywords: Study Routines, High-Achieving Students, Academic Excellence, Secondary Education, Learning Strategies, Time Management.

1. Introduction

Academic excellence is a symbol of high intelligence, hard work, and dedication. This is also a source of pride for students and their parents and a focus of the entire education system worldwide. In Pakistan, students face academic pressure due to intense competition, rigorous syllabi, and parental demands. According to the (Sembiring, 2017) despite several efforts, some students do not perform up to the mark. In this scenario, it is of immense importance to explore the dedication, adopted path to success, discipline, and other factors of those who attain high scores. This may be a helpful way for other students whose work may not be inspirational to adapt. The available empirical data address most behavioral and psychological factors; little research has examined the daily routines, discipline, and study habits of high achievers (Rae, 1995). This gap leaves behind an important path of success for others to follow. The central theme of the study is to differentiate the students based on their school performance and academic achievements, and to bring to light their innovative ways to achieve their targets. By identifying the factors behind their excellence, the aim is to provide actionable insights into accelerating other students' performance. This vision makes this study highly valuable.

2. Literature Review

Academic excellence is the challenge of every learner. The primary goal of every institution is to

realize learners' full potential and make them more valuable. As Calvin et al. (2017) also admit, academic excellence is a leading path to students' successful futures and multiple factors affect students' academic progress, including physical, cognitive, psychological, and disciplinary factors (Zimmerman, 2000). Among many other elements, study habits are also very important. A disciplined approach to studying and a proper study routine minimize conflicts and wasted time. Rather, it accelerates progress toward the target objectives and output. According to the Salmi, (2011) in the context of Pakistan, where several social pressures are working side by side, students need a proper schedule, routine, and study habits to compete with others healthily. There is extensive empirical data on various aspects of learners' lives, but little research on the importance of study habits and their consequences. The literature review acknowledges the importance of Self-Regulated Learning Theory in the context of the importance of learners' study habits. Self-Regulated Learning Theory highlights the importance of a self-disciplined way of living and learning. Gural, (2013) calls it behavioral management. According to it, high achievers are self-directed and eager to establish their own targets and work in the same direction. Once they specify their course of action, they may accept multiple challenges and strive to meet them. Gomez (2017) explains this behavior as the way to success in life. The cognitive abilities then function quickly due to the clarity and ambition. As Peng et al, (2018) also acknowledge, cognitive abilities play a role in connection with academic performance. Self-regulation depends largely on self-discipline, which requires strong cognitive, behavioral, and moral abilities. That makes a learner consistent in their way of action. Schunk (1996) also indicates this consistency through continuous monitoring and redirection, if required. Pintrich (2000) calls it the source of academic satisfaction. Research of Gomez, (2017) found that secondary school students exhibit the structured routine and study habits of high-performing students. They have their own plan of action. They are also ready to accept challenges and work accordingly. They do not want any interference with their plans or routines. According to Altbach, (2011) that they also entertain themselves in episodes when they feel burdened in their minds. Another important element in their academic life is drilling and connecting the facts with daily life. They memorize the facts, denote them, and decode them through routine work. They are constructive and progressive in nature. Such students want to move forward, to learn from their mistakes, and construct their plans accordingly (Covey, 1991). This research study focuses on four important elements: study habits, learning strategies, time management, and academic achievement. According to MacKinnon, (1960) study habits encompass study routine, goal-setting, focus, self-control, and self-discipline. Learning strategies explain the innovative learning styles and capacities of every learner from their unique perspective. It also elaborates on the mind's functioning, including its ability to understand, analyze, synthesize, memorize, retain, and apply (Freed, 1997). Time management is the ability to plan, focus, organize, and manage time effectively. Academic achievement is the level of excellence that students aim for (Van, 2012). This is the outcome and a source of inspiration to all concerned.

3. Objectives of the Study

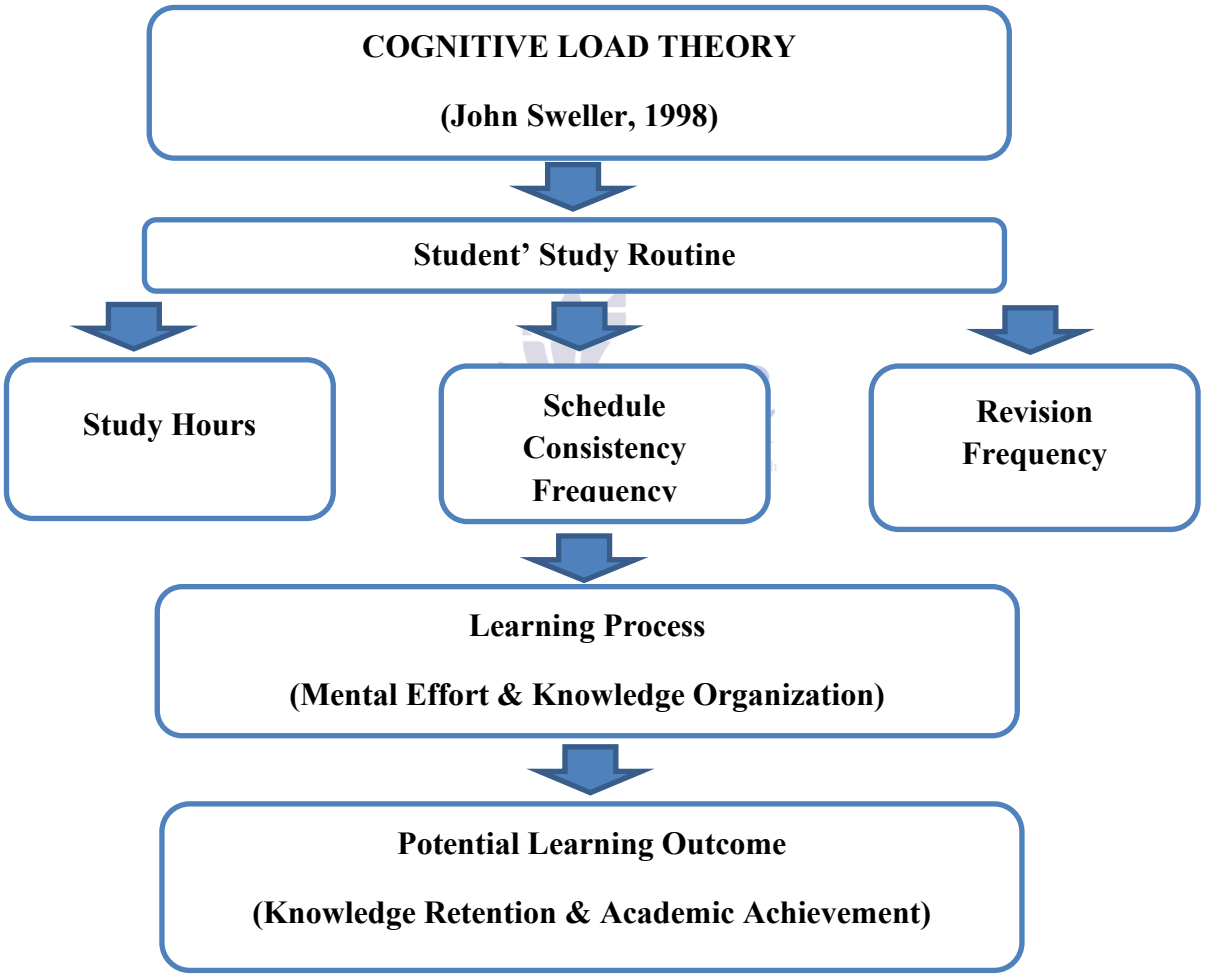
1. To identify and describe the specific study routines and daily learning practices followed by high-achieving secondary school students in Pakistan.
2. To examine the role of time management and organization in supporting the academic performance of top-performing students.
3. To analyze the cognitive and behavioral strategies employed by high-achieving students, such as revision techniques, note-taking, and active learning methods.
4. To explore the influence of contextual factors, including school type, parental support, and socio-economic background, on the study routines of high-performing students.

4. Research Hypotheses

1. High-achieving secondary school students follow structured and consistent study routines that are significantly different from those of average-performing students.
2. Effective time management and organization are positively associated with higher academic achievement among top-performing students.
3. The use of cognitive and behavioral learning strategies, such as active revision, self-testing, and goal setting, significantly predicts academic excellence in secondary school students.
4. Contextual factors, including parental support, school type, and socio-economic background, have a significant impact on the study routines and academic performance of high-achieving students.

5. Theoretical Framework of the Study

Figure 1: *Cognitive Load Theory*



This theory suggests that study duration schedule consistency, and revision practices may influence how students manage mental effort and organized knowledge. These factors may contribute to knowledge and academic achievement although their relationship require empirical testing.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design and Data Analysis Technique

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey research method. Data were collected from students through a structured questionnaire to obtain information about their responses, opinions, and experiences related to the research objectives. Data Analysis Technique: The collected quantitative data were analyzed using the percentage technique. Responses to each questionnaire item were counted, and their frequencies were converted into percentages to determine the proportion of students selecting each response category. This technique helped summarize the data, identify response patterns, and present the findings in a clear and understandable form.

6.2 Population

All secondary school students (Public and Private) in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, aged 13 to 16 years, constitute the study population. As the study concerns high achievers, the researcher selected the first 3 students in each class who ranked highest according to their school records.

6.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The researcher used a Stratified Random Sampling technique to collect data from the population. The population was first divided into two strata: Public and Private. Then, they were further divided by academic division: science and general studies. From each stratum, the researcher randomly selected the first ten positions to avoid biases. The study selected 400 high-achieving students from Public and Private secondary schools in Islamabad and Rawalpindi using a stratified random sampling technique the sample of the study was 185 students from different schools situated in Islamabad capital territory and Rawalpindi.

Table 1: Population and Sampling of High-Achieving Secondary School Students

Stratum	School Type	Academic Stream	Population (N)	Sample Selected (n)	Sampling Technique
Stratum 1	Public	Science	120	50	Stratified Random
Stratum 2	Public	Arts	80	35	Stratified Random
Stratum 3	Private	Science	100	50	Stratified Random
Stratum 4	Private	Arts	100	50	Stratified Random
Total	-	-	**400**	**185**	-

Data Collection Method A self-made, structured five-point Likert questionnaire was used to collect data from the population. There are four sections in the questionnaire: demographic information, study routines, cognitive and behavioral strategies, and contextual factors.

6.4 Pilot Testing

A pilot test was conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. 20 students were randomly selected to assess the level of each item, and Cronbach's alpha was calculated (α = 0.82).

6.5 Limitations of Methodology

Although the study design facilitated a detailed quantitative analysis, its scope was confined to secondary school students in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. This geographical limitation may constrain the generalizability of findings to other regions of Pakistan. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported data regarding study habits introduces the potential for social desirability bias. To mitigate this risk, self-reported measures were triangulated with academic records, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the data. Despite these limitations, the methodology employed is sufficient to yield reliable and

contextually valid insights into the study routines, learning strategies, and contextual factors associated with the academic success of high-achieving secondary school students in Pakistan

7. Data analysis

7.1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

A total of 185 high-achieving secondary school students were selected through stratified random sampling from public and private schools across Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics, including gender, age, and parental education.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=185)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	95	51.4
	Female	90	48.6
Age Group	13-14 years	60	32.4
	15-16 years	125	67.6
Parental Education	Graduate	80	43.2
	Postgraduate	60	32.4
	Intermediate or below	45	24.4
School Type	Public	85	45.9
	Private	100	54.1

The sample was balanced by gender, with slightly more males (51.4%). The majority of students were aged 15-16 years, reflecting the typical age range of high-achieving secondary school students in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Most parents had at least a graduate-level education, suggesting a correlation between parental education and student performance. Representation from public (46%) and private (54%) schools ensured diversity in school environments.

7.2 Study Routine Patterns

Students were surveyed about their daily study routines, including total hours spent, study schedule consistency, and revision frequency.

Table 3: Study Routine Patterns of High-Achieving Students (N=185)

Study Routine Aspect	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily Study Hours	2-3 hours approx.	40	21.6
	4-5 hours approx.	90	48.6
	6 hours approx.	55	29.7
Consistency of Study Schedule	Always consistent	120	64.9
	Sometimes consistent	55	29.7
	Rarely consistent	10	5.4
Revision Frequency	Daily	100	54.1
	Weekly	70	37.8
	Rarely	15	8.1

The most consistent students, nearly half of the sample, studied about 4 to 5 hours daily, whereas 30 percent studied more than 6 hours daily. More than half, about 54 percent, had a flexible study plan, whereas 65 percent remained consistent with strict study plans.

7.3 Use of Cognitive and Behavioral Learning Strategies

Students indicated the different academic and Behavioural techniques to maximize their learning. They reported self-testing, note-taking, goal setting, and summarization.

Table 4: Learning Strategies Employed by High-Achieving Students (N=185)

Strategy	Always Use (%)	Sometimes Use (%)	Rarely Use (%)
Self-testing	70	25	5
Note-taking	80	15	5
Summarization	65	30	5
Goal-setting	75	20	5
Active Recall/Practice	68	27	5

High-achieving students relied mostly on note-taking, then goal-setting, self-testing, practicing, and then summarizing.

7.4 Triangulation with Academic Performance

The high-achievers (85%) reported consistency in their study schedules and remained quick to revise and drill the concepts. Those who remained less consistent (75%) scored comparatively lower. This shows a triangulated relationship between self-discipline, a consistent study schedule, and drilling.

8. Findings of the Study

The study shows that high-achievers have specific attributes, such as a strict, structured study routine; the application of various cognitive and psychological techniques to improve understanding and internalization; content conditioning; relating concepts to daily life; and continuous drilling. The survey analysis shows that a larger number of students (48.6%) were engaged in self-study for 4 to 5 hours daily. This shows their concern and dedication to their studies and workouts in preparation for exams. Similarly, a larger number of students 65% remained consistent with their schedule and did not experience even a single change to interrupt their routine. 54% of students relied on revision and concept drilling, whereas 80% remained flexible in applying different strategies to make the content easier to understand. There is another important element of note-taking that is used by a larger number of students (80%), whereas (70%) remained busy in self-testing. All these attributes highlight the key elements of high achievers' study lives that set them apart from others.

9. Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that high-achieving students maintain their study routine and avoid any disturbance. They apply different strategies and cognitive processes to understand the concepts, and without deep understanding, they are not ready to move forward. They work according to learning theories, and their results remain excellent. For example, self-regulating theory emphasizes that self-disciplined efforts and consistent behaviour lead to success. The same elements are found in the study habits of high achievers. The theory also emphasizes the importance of self-testing and self-evaluation in achieving targets. The same attributes are found in these students: 65% show strictness in self-testing and self-evaluation, whereas 70% show consistent study routines. Academic records also acknowledge the same. Cognitive load Theory is another important theory that focuses on the cognitive processes and mental learning maps. According to it, structured study habits make the learning process easier by developing connections among learning materials and improving understanding. The findings of the research also show such behaviour among students, who build connections between different concepts to make them easier to understand. They remained strong in problem-solving and logic. This shows that effective mental maps and cognitive processes, when combined with scheduled routines and study habits, lead to success. Behavioural learning theories emphasize the importance of positive reinforcement and reactions. Students, in general, are conscious of their self-respect and remain competitive, striving to be in a leading position. The same fact is shown in the findings of this research study. Many students reported that they revise concepts daily to enhance their learning and recapitulate to connect the facts to

daily life. Parents' interviews also confirm the facts. They also describe their children's study habits, in which their children devote most of their time to revising concepts. The triangle of students, parents, and academic performance also confirms the same. Economic status of parents, parental support, and social and personal ambience are all valued factors in the success of high achievers. The study shows that students who have a strong social and financial background and whose parents are supportive and provide all types of facilities remain cool and morally strong. Social connections and a sense of self-esteem and prestige are also very important to be counted in the process of success, as we find in Maslow's theory. The same facts are globally acknowledged and recommended for self-learning and self-discipline.

10. Conclusions

This study explores hidden factors in the lives of high achievers that make their paths smoother. The study concluded that high achievers follow a self-directed, strict study routine that increases their focus and dedication. They remained consistent with their goals and applied a range of innovative, flexible cognitive and psychological measures to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts and their applications in everyday life. They were also in the habit of note-taking and drilling. It is concluded that intelligence is an innate gift of human beings, but circumstances and environments affect the quality of life. The most important element is motivation, dedication, and self-discipline that make every achievement possible.

11. Recommendations

It is recommended to the students for higher academic achievement that:

1. Be self-disciplined and motivated to achieve the target with energy and enthusiasm.
2. Make your study plan by yourself according to your needs and requirements.
3. Remain flexible and apply different cognitive and psychological techniques to make your learning more fruitful.
4. Get consistent guidance from teachers and parents.
5. Regulate your study habits and have enough time for drilling and revisions.
6. Have a positive and searchful mind to be updated with the current requirements and ways of learning.

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