

*In-Depth Inquiry on the Reasons of the Students' Academic Failures and
Their Coping Mechanism*

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Abstract

Using qualitative method of research, this study focused on the reasons of the students' academic failure (specifically those who failed more than 50% of the enrolled subjects) and their coping mechanism. Ten (10) participants under contract of Agreement (COA) were interviewed personally and virtually. Attitudes (laziness), computer gaming addiction, work, people, and personal issues were the primary reasons of academic failures. All seven participants also had different coping mechanisms: namely, diversion, redirection, and inspiration. Among the reasons, external factors were evident while among the coping mechanisms, those that would bring positive results were apparent. The results show that when it comes to academic failures, students are more vulnerable to external factors and that despite their failure, they still would like to go back on track.

Keywords: Academic Failures, Contract of Agreement, Coping Mechanism, Thematic Analysis, Probing

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Introduction

Students who go to higher education have stepped into the University with their minds set on success – to graduate on time. However, at the onset of their university life, some, if not many of them, already face the reality of academic failures. Some of these students who fail in the first semester of their first year in the university may not continue studying but others will just live with their failures and start all over again. Thus, academic failure, which is defined in this study as the inability of the student to get a passing mark of at least 75% as stipulated in the student handbook of the University of Baguio, results to a waste of time, money and may even have familial, social and mental-psychological impact (Najimi, et al., 2013).

The University's role is to mold and prepare students to become successful in the field that they have chosen. The curriculum in every course is set to train the students for the professional world. Ideally, a college student is expected to finish a bachelor's degree within four or five years depending on the chosen program. However, there are students who overstay in the university because of their academic failures referred to by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as the repetition of grade level and low quality of education received by the students (UNESCO, 1996 in Mortimore, 1998). Moreover, Khan et al. (2013) stated that failing academically has turned out to be a major concern in the higher area of learning. Equally alarming is also the fact that this academic failure has several consequences on the students. In fact, Mortimore (1998) named other factors resulting from academic failures like absenteeism, dropping out, low quality of education, and overstaying in the university.

Although the problem on academic failure is alarming, Blizard (2016) emphasized that the reason why students fail and the solutions to it are complicated but not given much understanding. Universities do not really dig deeper as to why these students fail academically and as to how this problem should be properly addressed. In addition, Anto et al. (2015) underlined the complexity of the causes of academic failures. In fact, in 2016, Villagonzalo found evidence that the students' ability to perform academically is significantly correlated with I.Q. However, Anto, et al. (2015), found out that there was no significant correlation between I.Q. and academic failure. This finding shows that academic failures can be caused by other factors. In 2013, Najimi et al. uncovered in their study that curriculum, factors related to educator, learning environment, family factors, and socioeconomic factors play a significant part in the students' academic failures. In addition, Diaz (2019) discovered that difficulty of subjects and tests, high passing score, financial problems, difficulty of understanding teacher's explanation, course not their choice, and noisy boarding house were among the reasons why students experience failure academically. Also, Junio and Liwag (2016) discovered that socio-economic status, students' aptitude, learning facilities and teacher characteristics affect the performance of the students of the Physical Education class in Lyceum of the Philippines University-Laguna.

In the studies of Najimi et al (2013), Diaz (2019), and Junio and Liwag (2016), the researchers used self-made or researcher-made questionnaires; thus, the factors affecting the academic performance of the students were pre-determined. In this study, however, the participants were given the chance to freely talk about the reasons of their academic failures according to what they had experienced. Moreover, in Najimi et al's (2013) study, the participants were exclusively students from the medical sciences department notwithstanding as to whether they failed or not. Similarly, Junio and Liwag (2016) conducted their study to

441 students regardless of the status of their academic performance. In this study, nonetheless, only those students who had been under the Contract of Agreement (COA) were considered. Students under COA are those who incurred failures in half of the number of subjects they enrolled. In Diaz's (2019) study, although the respondents were students who failed in one or more subjects, they were only exclusively students of Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) and Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd), and those who failed in only one subject was included.

The student-respondents' reasons of their academic failures were categorized according to Heider's Attribution Theory which refers to how behaviors of others should be understood (Rice, 2016). In addition, Hopper (2018) mentioned that Heider's Theory of Attribution talks about determining as to whether the cause of another person's behavior is internal or external. She further explains that the theory underlines the fact that the behavior of a person can be caused by internal factors (dispositional attribute) like personality, beliefs and the like or by external factors (situational attribute) like situations or circumstances and the like. Causes like I.Q., (Blizard, 2016), and Junio and Liwag's (2016) students' aptitude can be classified under dispositional attribute. On the other hand, curriculum, factors related to educator, learning environment, family factors, socioeconomic factors (Najimi et al. (2013), difficulty of the subjects and tests, high passing score, financial problems, difficulty of understanding teachers' explanation, course not their choice, noisy boarding house (Diaz, 2019), socio-economic status, learning facilities and teacher characteristics (Junio & Liwag, 2016) are categorized under situational attribute. Causes like I.Q., (Blizard, 2016), and Junio and Liwag's (2016) students' aptitude can be classified under dispositional attribute. In addition, curriculum, factors related to educator, learning environment, family factors, socioeconomic factors (Najimi et al. (2013), difficulty of the subjects and tests, high passing score, financial problems, difficulty of understanding teachers' explanation, course not their choice, noisy boarding house (Diaz, 2019), socio-economic status, learning facilities and teacher characteristics (Junio & Liwag, 2016) are categorized under situational attribute.

Failing academically can be a source of stress (Widyastuti et al., 2017). Segal (2020) stressed the fact that when a person experiences stress, his body is alerted to cope either by fighting or running away from it. Thus, coping is a natural tendency for a person under any kind of stress. Cleveland Clinic (2020) reinforced the statement of Segal (2020) saying that coping normally involves adapting to or enduring undesirable experiences while trying to maintain a positive image and balance. Coping is the ability to respond to stressful situation caused by negative experiences (Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, 2021) like failing academically. Thus, in addition to knowing the reasons why the student-respondents failed in 50% percent or more of their enrolled subjects, the ways they coped with were also studied.

Lazarus and Folkman's Macro-analytic State-Oriented Theory, which classifies emotional functions into self-controlling, confrontative coping, seeking social support, distancing, escape-avoidance, accepting responsibility, positive reappraisal and planful problem-solving (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 in Chowdbury, 2020), was used to classify the coping mechanisms of the student-respondents.

Awareness of the reasons of students' academic failure and of their coping mechanism will help the school management design programs to help students who are experiencing academic failures especially those who are put under COA. The findings will also help the teachers understand these students and enable them to design strategies that can help in the

students' pursuit for academic success. In addition, students struggling against the pressure of academic failures will be guided on how to cope with it.

This study aimed to have an in-depth understanding on why students in the University experience academic failures. Specifically, this study sought:

1. To understand the various reasons of students' academic failures; and
2. To identify their ways of coping with academic failures.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative design specifically the phenomenological aspects of the data presented in a narrative form.

This study made use of purposeful sampling where ten (10) participants under the Contract of Agreement (COA) Program (a program intended to help students who failed in 50% or more of their enrolled subjects for the semester) of the Center for Counseling and Student Development (CCSD) of the University of Baguio were subjected to face-to-face and virtual interview. The selected number of respondents met the standard of 5 to 25 participants set by Creswell (1998 in Deponio, 2018) and 6 for phenomenological studies recommended by Morse (1994, in Deponio, 2018). Due to the challenges posed by the pandemic such as the difficulty to communicate with the concerned students and to meet them personally, those who did not want to have the face-to-face interview, whether personally or virtually, agreed to answer the questions sent to them through email.

The questions were anchored on why they failed and what they did to overcome the consequences of their failure. Questions were sent to the respondents through email.

Their availability for the interview (whether face-to-face or virtual) was also taken into consideration. Three of the respondents did it face-to-face while the rest did it by answering the interview questions sent to them through email. The researcher from CCSD was in close contact with each of them for clarification and additional questions.

Prior to the interview which took place in the Center for Guidance and Counseling Office (for those who preferred face-to-face) or online (for those who chose virtual), the respondents were asked to voluntarily sign an informed consent whose contents were explained to them prior to their signing. For virtual interview participants, informed consent was sent to them via email or messenger.

The proponents used inductive analysis and creative synthesis as analysis strategy in which important themes were explored and confirmed through analyzing the responses of the participants after categorization. Engagement in the important points of the information to determine important patterns, themes, and interrelationships was done by studying, then substantiating based on analytical principles resulting to creative synthesis. Since the study was qualitative, the validity of data can only be assured through truth value, consistency, and applicability (Noble & Smith, 2015). To assure that data were true, consistent, and applicable, the results were shown to the respondents before the paper was finalized.

To protect the privacy of the respondents, only the researcher who is a staff from CCSD conducted the face-to-face or virtual interview. However, prior to the interview, the concerned participants' willingness to participate was secured. Each was given an informed

consent form. The participant was allowed to withdraw participation in instances in which emotional discomforts were triggered. Only those who were willing were asked to sign the informed consent and were asked for the convenient time they could appear for the face-to-face or virtual interview. Moreover, the participants were informed that their names would not appear in the research as codes would be used to represent the respondents. Furthermore, they were also informed that the results of the study would be presented or published and that results would be shown to them prior to presentation or publication.

Results and Discussions

This section presents results, discussions, analysis, and interpretations of the findings on the reasons of the students' academic failures and their coping mechanism.

Reasons of Academic Failures

Academic failure is nothing new. Although not everyone experiences it, it is a fact that there are students who go through it while they are in the university. The ten (10) participants of this study went through academic failures in 50% or more of their subjects, enough for them to sign a COA. However, each of them had reason/s why he/she failed academically. The reasons were categorized into the following themes: attitude (laziness), computer gaming addiction, work, people, and personal issues.

Attitude

According to McLeod (2018), attitude refers to a person's approval or disapproval, his pessimistic or optimistic assessment of the persons or anything he is exposed to. Attitude can be bad or good. The responses of the participants in this research, however, were categorized under bad attitude as they were on laziness, negligence, and procrastination.

Laziness, according Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.), is the unwillingness to do things. In relation to this, three students directly admitted that one of the reasons of their academic failures was laziness.

Student B was happy-go-lucky, saying, *"feeling ko basic lang ang Business Ad."* (*I thought Business Ad was just easy.*)

Student C admitted that he was "irresponsible and lazy".

Student D acknowledged the fact that he was lazy, saying, *"I become [became] lazy, so I failed to pass the requirements."*

Student E had the same reason with students C and D stating, *"I was lazy to review."*

Moreover, although student F did not directly say that he was lazy, it was clear in his statement, *"I failed my subjects because of not submitting requirements"*, that he also failed because of laziness.

Similarly, student I also admitted that he *"was not passing activities."*

Another negative attitude seen in the responses was being lax defined by Cambridge dictionary (2021) as lacking care, attention, or control or not severe or strong enough. Being lax caused students B, C, and H time, efforts, money in their academics.

Students B admitted that he was lax because he felt the course was easy that he did not need to put antra care and attention to the subjects. He said, *“feeling ko basic lang ang Business Ad” (I thought Business Ad was just easy.)*

Similarly, student C underestimated the difficulty of the subjects saying he was *“too comfortable”* that he did not pay much attention to them. In addition, when he failed, he was still very comfortable saying, *“Kaya yan sa susunod” (I can do it the next time).*

Student H declared, *“I failed my subjects before because I am [was] a happy go lucky person sometimes. I procrastinate.”*

Computer Gaming Addiction

Hoeg (2021) defined computer addiction or computer gaming addiction as excessive use of computer resulting to decrease in productivity. Computer gaming addiction is related to internet addiction which, according to Shaw & Black (2008), is described extreme desires to use the computer leading to damage or trouble. Evidently students A, D and E had become obsessed with computer gaming that resulted to them failing in several of their subjects.

Student A claimed, *“I was addicted to computer gaming since it was a part of my upbringing”*. He further stated, *“It took 56 hours spent in computer games in a week (I spent 56 hours in computer games in a week).* It must be noted that student A was also working while he was studying. However, even his days off would be spent for computer gaming as well.

Student D suffered the same fate as student A as he was also addicted to computer gaming. He said, *“I become [became] addicted to Mobile Legends (online game).”*

Student E’s academic failure was a result of his spending his whole nights on the computer. He revealed, *“I was playing computer the while night.”* His playing computer the whole night led him to be sleepy and inactive during the day.

Work

Students A, F, and I were working students. They claimed that working while studying was difficult as they had to meet the pressures for both situations. Students find it stressful to manage both work and study and the stress may sometimes lead them to leave school without finishing the semester (Tinto, 1975 in Curambao (2015). Students A, F and I did not leave school without finishing their subjects. However, working while studying took a toll on their grades.

Student A explained that his study was affected because of *“ideological issues at work,”* but he did not want to explain further about these ideological issues in his work. However, this is not the only reason why he failed as mentioned earlier, he was also addicted to computer gaming.

Student F said that “*work and pressure*” caused him to fail.

Also, student F said, “*I was working to earn money to pay for my tuitions [tuition].*”

People

Educators and family are found to be factors leading to students’ academic failure in the study of Najimi, et al. (2013). Also, Junio and Liwag (2016) discovered teacher characteristics as also one factor that led students to academic failure. However, data gathered in this study revealed that friends, instructor, family, and other people around them were factors contributing to the respondents’ academic failures.

Student B claimed, “*I failed to comply in my new course because of being irritated to [of] the environment or people around [me] until [I] decided to drop.*”

Student C also said, “*I got demotivated because of people asking about my grades.*” In addition, he said that his “*severe disconnection to [form] family members at home*” also contributed to his not performing well academically.

Student G put the blame of his academic failures on his instructor, saying, “*I usually do not like the instructor specially when I cannot understand what he / she is talking about.*”

Friends, though most of the time, help an individual become productive, they were not academically helpful to student H as he stated, “*In the past, I was distracted by friends.*”

Personal Issues

McKay (2019) attached personal issues to family problems, life-changing situations, emotional difficulties, illness, and even one's sexual orientation that affects one’s ability to perform well. Two of the students mentioned personal issues as factor resulting to their academic failure. However, they did not want to reveal the specific personal issue they had.

Student J explicitly said, “*...my personal problems that I cannot share with anybody*” as the factor affecting his academic performance.

Student E, in addition to his laziness and computer gaming addiction, said that another contributory factor to his academic failure is “*personal issues*”, but he did not expound further.

Grading System

Encyclopedia of Education (2019) defined grading as the teacher’s way to professionally evaluate the learning of the students. It includes gathering and assessing proofs of student’s performance over a specified period. In the University of Baguio, the grading system is cumulative in which the cut-off score is seventy percent (70%) (University of Baguio Student Handbook, 2020). Among the nine (9) respondents, only student C mentioned grading system as one of the factors of his academic failures in addition to laziness and people.

The themes on attitudes, and personal issues are considered internal factors (Dispositional Attributes of Heider’s Attribution Theory). On the other hand, computer gaming addiction,

work, people, and grading system are external factors (Situational Attribute) (Hopper, 2018). It can be significantly noted from the result that academic failure cannot be attributed to the intellectual ability of the students. This supports Anto, et al.'s (2015) claim about the absence of significant correlation between academic failure and I.Q.

Coping Mechanism

Every individual who faces some difficulties in life always has a coping mechanism. Lazarus and Folkman (1984, as cited in Chowdhury, 2021) defined coping as continuous change in mental and behavioral attempts to handle extremely difficult external and internal challenges faced by an individual. The ten participants had their own coping mechanisms, and these are categorized according to the following themes: diversion, redirection, and inspiration.

Diversion

Cambridge Dictionary (2021) defines diversion as something that takes one's attention away from something else. Five of the ten respondents coped with the consequences of their academic failure by diverting their attention away from the issue.

Students A, B, E, G and H coped with their academic failures by diverting their attention from the failures to other things that made them busy and busier. Student A said, "*Sightseeing, occasional liquor drinking and music became my new hobbies,... and ASMR...prayer*".

Student B tried to divert his attention into smoking. He revealed, "*I tried smoking but stops [stopped]*".

Student E, on the other hand, diverted his attention more on the cause of his academic failure – computer addiction. He said, "*I do more computer games.*" However, this time, he added, "*playing chess*" as additional diversion.

Student G, on the other hand, said, "*Yeah, I have lots of hobbies, exploring the computer world, and surfing the internet. I like dancing, painting, building new things*".

Student H tried to cope with by playing games and reading manga. He said, "*The hobby that I do [did] is [was] playing some games on my phone [and] reading manga.*"

Student I coped with the situation, saying, "*I do sketching [sketched] while listening [I listened] to music.*"

Redirection

Holland (2019) calls this coping mechanism as intellectualization, a strategy in which the person experiencing a difficult circumstance may decide to react disregarding the emotional impact of the situation and focus instead on measurable facts. This coping strategy was also used by nine of the participants. Students A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H and I came to the realizationrealized that they needed to finish the course, so they had to redirect their actions into something that would bring them out of their failures. They said,

A: “[I became more conscious to deadlines,” and “*I review[ed] [the] day before classes as preparation.*” These are in addition to his coping with through sightseeing, drinking liquor a little, listening to music, and praying.

B: “*I made plans and goals.*”

C: “*I take an action by memorizing formulas for subjects, admired usage of the library, reviewers where it can help me in practicing solving problems, congregating each other: sharing notes and online chatting, persistence and resilience, and underestimate the subject lesser.*” (I memorized formula, used the library, used reviewers that helped me solved problems, communicated with others online for notes, became persistent and resilient, and underestimated the subject less.)

D: “*I said to myself that it will not happen again, and I will focus more on academic not on online games.*”

E: “*I study [studied] and read a lot about the subject I fail [failed].*”

F: “*I chat [chatted] with the teachers to have completion activity.*”

G: “*I just re enrolled them and try again until I pass.*”

H: “*just let aside my failed subject and learn from my mistakes. I learn from my mistakes and move forward.* (I accepted I failed, learned from my mistakes, and moved forward.)

I: “*Learn from my mistake, falling subject feel like a huge setback, especially when you work hard all the semester. I will study hard and postpone working so I can cope up with the others.*” (I learned from my mistakes. To fail was a huge setback especially that I worked hard that semester.)

Inspiration

According to Wooditch (2017), inspiration is something that motivates a person to achieve what seems unachievable. It can be anything impacting the feeling of a person and triggers him to do what seems cannot be done. Five of the participants coped with through inspiration. Students B, E, G, H, and J coped with by drawing inspirations from other sources. Student B drew his inspiration from his friends and strangers. She said, “*My friends and other strangers pushed me to continue.*”

Student E said, “*Yes, I talked with a lot of people.*”

Student G confirmed that he also got inspiration and motivation from his friends, but most of the time, he wanted to be alone. He said, “*I have many friends whom I can talk to, but most of the time I like to be alone.*”

Student H got his inspiration from his mother and his sister, saying, “*I talk[ed] to my sister and my mother.*”

Student J remorsefully said, “*Since most of my failing remarks are [were]caused by distractions, after having a wakeup call, I immediately compose[d] myself and think*

[thought]of my family for they are [have been] the ones who keep [have kept] me going and help[ed] me fight through all of [those] things.”

The theme on diversion can be classified under the emotional function of Self-control and Escape and Avoidance of Lazarus and Folkman’s theory of coping with (Chowdbury, 2020) since the students tried to control their emotions or to deny the same towards the situation by diverting their attention to other activities. The theme on redirection falls under Strategic Problem-solving emotional function of coping with because the students found ways and implemented solution-focused strategies to survive the situation and used their plans to achieve success. The theme on inspiration belongs to the emotional function of Social Support since the respondents sought strength from people around them to help them cope with the emotional impact of their academic failures.

The result denotes that most of the participants chose coping mechanisms that would bring them out of the difficult situation although there were a few of them who ventured on coping mechanisms that could bring them more harm than good.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

This study was conducted to discover the reasons of the college students’ academic failure and their coping mechanisms. Findings showed that the reasons the ten participants placed under COA failed 50% or more of their enrolled subject for the semester were their attitude (laziness), personal issues (Dispositional Attribute), computer gaming addiction, work, people, and grading system (Situational Attribute). Data also showed that the participants resorted to diversion through leisure, meditation and relaxation activities (Self-control and Escape and Avoidance), redirection (Strategic Problem-solving), and inspiration (Social Support) as their coping mechanisms.

Although the findings show that the reasons of the students’ academic failures cannot be generalized, it can be significantly noted that external factors played a greater role compared to the internal factors. Also, it is evident that the participants resorted to one or more coping mechanisms which might have led them to more downfall or helped them rise from their current situation.

Recommendations

Through these findings, the researchers would like to recommend the following:

1. School administrators are encouraged to come up with a remedial program addressing the students’ academic failures taking into considerations the varied reasons presented in this study.
2. Teachers are encouraged to dig deeper into the reasons of the students failing in their classes to help them cope with.
3. Conduct of a qualitative and quantitative study on the same topic which involves a bigger and diverse population should be done.
4. Quantitative-qualitative research of this topic should be conducted to empirically explain the reasons of the students’ failures.

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