Success *IS* a choice! Explaining success in Academic Preparation Programs in Israel

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Abstract

Operating within universities and colleges, Academic Preparation Programs in Israel (APPs) allow students in their twenties a second chance to pass their matriculation examinations, a requirement for acceptance by academic institutions. This research aims at explaining the success of students who have succeeded in passing matriculation examinations who have failed in the past. For this purpose we interviewed 28 such students. The findings suggest four different factors that have impacted these students: 1) The changes that occurred in the students themselves; 2) The teachers' support; 3) The support provided by the learning environment; 4) the students' recognition of the opportunity they received in the APP compared with their high school studies.

Keywords

Sociology of education, success in learning, academic preparation program, qualitative research

Introduction

Academic Preparatory Programs (APPs) aim to provide a second chance, mainly for individual members of weak socio-economic groups who initially failed their matriculation examinations at the end of their secondary education studies, to succeed in passing the examinations (Hayush & Fresco, 2006). Lacking a matriculation certificate testifying to his/her successful completion of all required matriculation examinations, an individual will find it extremely difficult to find employment enabling him/her to pursue a

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professional career or advance professionally in any formal employment system in Israeli society. Additionally, higher education in Israel is not accessible to those who do not have a matriculation certificate.

Data gathered by Ayalon, Shapira, and Shavit (1992), in a study on the entire system that provides students with a second chance at passing their matriculation examinations, show that students choosing to study in APPs use their second opportunity to their advantage, achieving a high degree of success. A study conducted by Hayush and Fresco (2006) shows that 89% of AAP students graduated with a matriculation certificate, and 58% of them continued their studyies at institutions of higher learning.

In this research we focused on APP students who experienced the highest degree of difficulty in the preparatory course studies. We began our study immediately after they had succeeded in passing the first half of their matriculation examinations. We wanted to understand how they explained their success; we assumed that they might provide some crucial information about the conditions required for improving the academic performance and achieving academic success for students who find it very difficult to do so.

Theoretical background

The matriculation examinations

The matriculation examinations are formal examinations prepared by the Ministry of Education of the State of Israel in order to set a uniform and high standard of achievement in the school system. Meeting these pre-set standards entitles a student to a matriculation certificate. Grade levels in the certificate determine to a large extent the selective process by which students go on to higher education or to the job market. These exams are an integral part of the curriculum in the secondary schools of the country. Failure to meet the minimum standard set by the Ministry of Education results in a student being ineligible for the matriculation certificate.

During the 2006-2007 school year, for example, 83% of all adolescents in the 12th grade age group attended 12th grade in secondary education institutions; 83% of those attending 12th grade took the matriculation examinations, but only 52% of the entire age group (including those not attending the 12th grade) graduated with a matriculation certificate (Israel Statistical Annual, 2009). However, given the importance of these examinations for the students' future, the Ministry allows the candidates to take the examinations a second time. This gives them a "second chance" to make up for past failures and thus earn a matriculation certificate, which is a pre-requisite when applying to prestigious university departments, or to improve their results (Ministry of Education, 2009).

The Academic Preparatory Programs (APPs)

The APPs are college and university courses of study meant to aid students from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, or to assist those whose educational environment impaired their academic progress. The purpose of the APPs is to give students a second chance, by preparing them for their matriculation examinations and university studies (Ayalon et al., 1992; Ministry of Education, 2009).

The students at the APPs must pass matriculation examinations at the same level as those they failed in the past, but under different personal and institutional circumstances. At the personal level, they are no longer adolescents, but adults in their early twenties with some independent life experience. Although they have found learning difficult in the past and have very little confidence due to repeated failures at school, the decision to study in the APP is a deliberate choice. At the institutional level, the studies at the APP are financed by external government and social agencies; the APP takes into account the students' background by modifying the curriculum to the needs of this special kind of student (Ayalon et al., 1992; Ministry of Education 2009).

Students who failed in the past and the difficulties they faced

The difficulties in learning faced by students have failed feed personal-emotional processes and are fed by them. These students have difficulties in coping with basic academic skills, such as fast and extensive reading, fluent writing, mathematical calculations, organizing time, and meeting deadlines (Winter & Yaffe, 2000). These difficulties create a significant barrier between the students' academic potential and its realization.

Students who meet with repeated failure at school throughout their studies and who have not realized their potential experience feelings of frustration and helplessness many times over. These students suffer long years of shame, and feel that they have not achieved control over their life (Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1997). They are stigmatized as unfit to learn anything, are anxious, frustrated, and angry, and have a basic sense of worthlessness and low self-esteem (Bender & Wall, 1994). These students experience more difficulty working under pressure, dealing with criticism, and dealing with changes, which are likely to interfere with their academic performance (Hatzes, 1996).

Moreover, people who have repeatedly failed relate differently to factors engendering their successes and failures. Compared to other students, they are likely to display a higher external locus of control; this is especially so in the academic field. Specifically, when successful, they tend to credit their success to external factors such as luck. On the other hand, they tend to blame their failures on internal factors such as a lack of diligence or a lack of personal capabilities (Wehmeyer and Kelchner 1996; Scarpati, Malloy and Fleming 1996). This means they take responsibility for their failures, but do not give themselves credit for their successes (Heath and Weiner 1996).

In order to remedy this situation, the learning environment has to enable consistent attendance (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010) and to support both the student's acquisition of learning skills and the student's emotional ability to deal with

his/her difficulties. These are extremely significant, and are very likely to improve academic achievement (Nelson, 1998).

Academic success and the ability to explain it

For our purposes we will define academic success as the students' ability to meet the challenge of the APP or, simply put, to pass the matriculation examinations. Experiencing success following perennial failure means that the change the individual has undergone has been effective, leading the student to attain the goals that were set for him/her (Kezar & Eckel, 2007). Since success cannot be achieved without the students making a significant contribution themselves, it is important that they are aware of this fact. This awareness may turn out to be the key to future success, if the students understand the fact that this pattern of thinking is a developing pattern that changes with time and depends on individual effort (Dweck, 2006).

Finally, these students' explanations of their success in the examinations are valuable, since they enable the understanding of the processes involved in achieving success (Heiman, 2006), which can strengthen their sense of self-efficacy, that is to say, the ability to replicate their success using the same personal and cultural tools that helped them originally (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). For this to happen, it is imperative that the learners credit their success mainly to themselves. Was this really the case?

Method

Participants

We chose 28 APPs students – 10 males and 18 females - out of 64 students. The interviewees shared two common features: they defined themselves as students that failed throughout their years at school, and they had passed at least four matriculation examinations, which means that they could relate to their success.

The research process

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students. Each interview lasted about an hour. In each case, the interview began with the question: "Tell me a little about yourself". Following this opening question, the students were then asked questions along this line: "Could you tell me about your previous studies?" "What difficulties did you meet in your studies at the APP?" "How did you overcome these difficulties?" "Who or what helped you?" "Can you give an example of the kind of problem you had and how you solved it?" "What kind of help did you receive from the APP?" "How do you explain your success in the matriculation examinations?" The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then given to the students for corrections, additions, and comments.

The content analysis was performed by reading the written texts of the interviews and identifying the common foci and central subjects recurring in the interviews. A preliminary division of the material into categories and sub-categories was done by using an inductive analysis strategy (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), while simultaneously relating to the central research question – the explanations for success – as the point of departure for the relevant strategy of the analysis (Yin, 1994). All references in the interviews to the research question were placed under one of the sub-categories. The categories and the sub-categories were drafted by the three researchers who carried out this study until a consensus was gradually reached as to the final draft (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).

The central research question of the study was "How do students who have repeatedly failed in the past explain their success after passing matriculation examinations?"

Findings

An analysis of the students' explanations clearly shows four different domains affecting their performance: 1) the changes that occurred in the students themselves; 2) the support of the APP teachers; 3) the support of the APP learning environment; and 4) the comparison of their high school studies with APP studies.

The changes occurring in the APP student

All the interviewees acknowledged a personal change, namely the fact that they had matured since graduating high school. Physical maturity had brought along intellectual and mental maturity; they were now fully aware of the importance of an education –"'*a high school education is not sufficient and one should go on to higher education*" (Rachel, 25.12.2006), and that "*one must complete the matriculation examinations because without them one cannot get ahead in life*" (Roy, 8.1.2007). Also, they were more willing to invest time and effort in their studies – "*Until I came to the APP I did not know what it is to sit for hours to learn something*" (Ohad, 5.2.2007) or "*I invest a lot in every subject, a lot more than the formal study hours*" (Tal, 19.2.2007). In addition, they understood the importance of acquiring intellectual skills and learning strategies. The tools they repeated in most of the interviews were: the ability to set goals and adhere to them, and the acquisition what they called "organization": time management such as allotting time for homework, and organizing the way they learn – for example, taking notes in class or highlighting important passages while reading a text.

Oren said:

Order, order, and more order: loose-leaf dividers, different notebooks, clear handwriting – these things help. I try to divide up my time so that I can prepare all my homework; I write down things I do not understand; I try to attend classes

regularly; I write something and go over it again. I always highlight things I have to remember; I use different colors. (8.1.2007)

The teachers' support

The students noted support they received from the APP teachers for fostering their self-esteem by trusting them – *"They gave me a feeling that I am capable"* (David, 5.2.2007); *"The push – the encouragement to progress, believing that I can do it"* (Menachem, 26.2.2007); by showing that they cared for them – *"He gave me a look of concern and asked me what happened that I had not done my homework"* (Dafna, 25.12.2006);*"'Every time a student is absent he calls and asks if he is ill and needs help"* (Ziv, 5.3.2007); by being determined to help them – *"It was clear to me that she would not let me go, and she would pull me along to the very end until I would succeed"* (Shiri, 12.2.2007).

Oded stated:

> When I arrived at the prep program I was "astonished" because people had always tried to intimidate me, saying that at university you are on your own, a stranger, a nobody, one among thousands of anonymous faces; but suddenly when I got here and found teachers that call you at home, and when you are absent, they take things personally, this is reason enough to take advantage of the APP; the teachers take it personally; it is important to them and I try not to disappoint them…the teacher took me by the neck and never let up or gave up on me; I got 63 (3 units), and this is after I never got more than 40 in high school trying to pass a one point (unit) exam. (29.1.07)

Also, the support of the teachers helped them to improve their learning, for example, by structuring the courses into manageable progressive steps that covered the whole course gradually and were adapted to their needs. The support for their learning also included offers to *practice* in class and out of the class with the teacher's help. In addition, the teachers helped them to focus on the goal by being focused themselves only on whatever was required to pass the examinations, and no more than that. The students claimed that this limitation was positive because it gave them the feeling that they would be able to master the material on the examination. Lilach tells us:

> The teachers try to explain things to the students in a way that they understand; they try to lower the level and raise the level gradually and they answer whenever they are asked questions. Besides, the teachers are excellent; they use good teaching methods that enable us to practice and review in very interesting ways. It helps and it's very successful. The math teacher, for instance, has excellent methods; every lesson she goes back to review things. In English, we focus on how to answer questions, and not, for example, on tenses, like we used to do in high school. Everything we learn is learned with a clear aim in mind, and we know what we are going to achieve after working with our focus on the goal. (19.2.2007)

Another kind of support they claimed to receive from the teachers was integrating learning and enjoyment – using a lot of humor in making points clear. The expression "it is fun to learn" can be heard in almost all the interviews. Shira described this as follows:

> I enjoyed it. It was fun coming to class. The lesson was funny. I stayed up doing homework even till three in the morning... The teachers are not so formal; the lecturer speaks our language; he relates the Bible to current events... I get up in the morning with the feeling it is fun to go to school here; things are flexible; there is laughter in the classroom; it is the same thing in English class. (5.2.2007)

The support of the learning environment

The students felt there was always someone to whom they could turn – the office secretary, the teaching staff, the coordinator of the program, and the counselor. The entire staff was always willing and ready to help. Tal talked to us about his contacts with the staff:

> The counselor was always ready to listen, she knew how to cheer us up, how to help; she spoke to the teachers and reported back to us. She gave me tips and tools to study the right way. She sat with me privately once a week and gave me personal attention. I felt like someone was listening to me, and not judging me; this feeling stayed with me till the end. I always had someone to turn to whether at the office or in the teachers' room. In the office I get all the help I need as much as possible and with open arms. It gives you a great feeling. I never thought I would ever get something like this. (19.2.2007)

This comprehensive support influenced the atmosphere among the students. Some students said that this led to a greater focus on the learning, but at the same time cooperating with each other. Sharona describes the social atmosphere as follows:

> Socially, there are learning groups; friends teach friends; we sit together giving up everything else, and study till night. We push each other. This part of the experience is very strong; I have many friends in class, and we learn together both here and in class. Studying together has helped me a lot; one of my friends catches on very quickly, and she reviews the lesson with me at home; that really helps. (29.1.07)

The students' recognition of the opportunity they were given in the APP compared with previous studies

One of the things that came up repeatedly in the interviews was the comparison between the studies in high school and studying at the APP. Most of the APP students had painful memories from school. When comparing the experience in high school with that in the APP, the comparison was enough to spur them on. They sensed that this time

around they must not miss the opportunity to pass the examinations. The comparison included the following aspects: their APP studies were elective studies, that is to say the students had chosen to take the course, whereas their studies in their past were compulsory; the focus was on learning, which was opposite to the waste of time involved in dealing with discipline problems in high school; and there was a positive atmosphere at the APP compared with the pressures of high school, which suppressed learning. This negative high school atmosphere was created when classes were divided into streamed groups and courses (academic and non-academic trends), with these students being banished to the bottom of the social scale. In the APP, however, everything was done to create a positive, tension-free atmosphere and to foster learning. Eran put it this way:

> Here it is fun to learn, not like high school where I was afraid of the teachers. Here they don't have to deal with discipline, only with learning. In high school, I wasn't interested in learning anything. What's the difference between here and there? There I didn't understand anything; here I understand. It could be that I have grown up; there I was undisciplined. Here people come to improve their grades, and not to play, so it's different from high school. People here are much more serious; 24-25 years old, so everybody is more grown up; this makes people more serious than they were in high school. I, too, have grown up; in school I could not sit still at all; I didn't have enough time to write down anything, and I just wasn't into learning perhaps because I found it so hard; going to school meant suffering, and so I let it out creating discipline problems. (19.3.2007)

Discussion

The interviews with the APP students revealed that the conditions required for successful learning were the opportunity they were presented with, readiness and effort on their part, and the warm, focused, and built-in support they received from the professional staff. Previous research has shown that students who used to fail attribute failure to themselves, but attribute their success to external factors (Scarpati et al., 1996; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996). APP students attribute a meaningful part of their success to themselves rather than to external factors. The reasonfor this may lie in the fact that the transition period from perpetual failure at school to success as adults in the APP was relatively long and gradual. During this relatively long period of time they experienced situations that gave them an opportunity to see themselves – their strengths and limitations – outside the school framework, with their decision to pursue their studies leading to a greater effort on their part in the process of reaching the defined goal they set for themselves. This process included the support of the teaching staff and the learning environment, and the students' keen awareness that they were being given a very unique opportunity to complete their studies.

To the above,, we need to add the most critical factor for achieving success – the ability of an individual to achieve control of his/her life. Control is evinced on two different mutually-supporting levels: the decision-making level, which is interior, and the exterior level, where the individual exercises control (Reiff et al., 1997). These two strata

were clearly evident in the students' accounts of what had occurred in the APP. On the internal decision level, the importance of studying was clear to them. They were ready to invest time and effort in their studies, and they learned how to deal with the difficulties and the frustrations that followed, acquiring appropriate learning strategies along the way. On the level of the outer manifestation of control, the students were willing to accept the teachers' support, both in the area of fostering their self-esteem and the adaptation of teaching methods; they accepted the environmental, institutional and social support provided by the APP.

Every student in the APP works toward one central goal – passing the matriculation examinations. As this is an individual goal, which seemingly excludes interdependence among the learners, there is no good justification for assuming that the students would cooperate and seek mutual help. Therefore, the students' assertion regarding their peers' support as part of the reason for their success is especially interesting. This support, in their words, stemmed from the direct and indirect encouragement received from the APP teachers. The direct encouragement included guiding group work, and having students work in cooperation by giving group assignments in class and for homework. The indirect encouragement includeed a competition-free atmosphere and relating to a common denominator – all the students were at the initial stage of an individual challenge. It was this atmosphere, together with the proximity of learning together for so many hours, which engendered the supportive social ties.

To conclude, the present study included a small number of students, all from the same APP, who had repeatedly failed in the past. It would be of great benefit to examine other groups of students who have made the transition from failure to success, in order to compare the factors that helped them make this transition. We would recommend keeping track of the students that have undergone this transformation in order to determine whether they continued on the path to success with the tools they acquired in the APP, or whether their success was a one-time event that occurred thanks to the special conditions offered them on a silver platter, and that will not be offered to them again during their years in higher education or in their work as adults.

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