



MARK SHAMING

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Abstract: Mark shaming refers to the act of ridiculing or belittling a student based on their academic performance, by parents, teachers, peers or society. Every child, irrespective of his/her abilities, strengths or challenges, is expected to study well and score high marks. It is based on the belief that students should get high marks in school to get into a good college, then get high marks in college to get offered a good job, which will then lead to a successful career. Those children who fall short of these expectations are urged to study more, advised that the child's success in life is directly proportional to their marks, to the extent of even hurting the child physically and emotionally. Is it possible for every child to score high marks with more effort? How well does intelligence connect with one's mark? How well does success connect with one's mark? Is marks the only aspect of education? This paper explores the realities of these aspects. It also discusses the impact of mark shaming and provides suggestions and real-time solutions on how to deal with low academic achievement.

Index Terms: Mark shaming, academic achievement, self-concept, successful life, flexible education

Introduction

Mark shaming refers to the act of ridiculing or belittling a student based on their academic performance, by parents, teachers, peers or society. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem among students who are struggling academically. According to a 2018 study by the Journal of Youth and Adolescence, such negative experiences can lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety among students.

Behind Mark Shaming

Any school-going child spends the majority of the time in education related activities like attending school, doing homework, preparing for exams, attending extra tuition or after-school classes which compensate for or contribute to the schooling system. Very little time is left for focussing on hobbies, extra-curricular skills or leisure. This system makes the child and parent feel that the primary focus is on education, the race in education and high mark- scoring expectations.

There is no real clarity on what can be considered a good mark, it is subjective. For some parents it is above 90%, a pass mark for some and nothing less than a centum for a few. Whatever it is, most parents are not satisfied with any mark and they keep pushing to score better till they reach the maximum and if at all the maximum is reached in all subjects, then they push the child to achieve in other non-academic areas while still maintaining that maximum level of mark. This practice of continuously raising the bar and the 'never enough' attitude may break the child at some point and lead to a stage of dissatisfaction even after achieving so much.

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child's success in life is directly proportional to their marks, to the extent of even hurting the child physically and emotionally. Is it possible for every child to score high marks with more effort? How well does intelligence connect with one's mark? How well does success connect with one's mark? Is marks the only aspect of education? This paper explores the realities of these aspects. It also discusses the impact of mark shaming and provides suggestions and real-time solutions on how to deal with low academic achievement.

Academic Achievement vs Intelligence

Every child is unique. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences identifies different types of intelligences – logical, linguistic, musical, kinesthetic, inter-personal, intra-personal, naturalistic, spatial, existential intelligences. Our education system emphasises more on logical and linguistic intelligence. Even if a child possesses capabilities and strengths in the other areas of intelligence, it is not of any use in the educational aspect.

A study showed that different students possessed different forms of intelligences. Most students had more than one forms of intelligence. The IQ scores correlated with only logical/mathematical, spatial, and musical intelligence. However, even in the low average IQ group, many students had other forms of intelligences. (Singh 2017)

Research studies indicate a significant and positive correlation between IQ and academic achievement (Neisser et al., 1996; Anderson and Keith, 1997). It means, higher the level of intelligence of students, better would be their academic performance.

Another study proved the existence of bright underachieving students (low academic achievement in spite of high IQ) in India. It can be said that the identified low achievers were not performing according to their potential. This unidentified population is in dire need of attention towards their problems and underlying causes. The talent of these children is being wasted and it becomes the moral duty of researchers and educators to help these children in utilising their potential to a maximum level. (Malik 2006)

Different people have different talents and not everyone's talents are measured by a simplistic thing like grades or marks. (Afarian 2003)

Also, individuals have varied cognitive profiles with variations in memory and processing speed. Dyslexics may have a weak working memory and slower processing speed in spite of above average IQ. But the education system is more favourable to those with good memory and speed, making it challenging for the others to score high marks. There may be slow learners with borderline IQ who cannot be expected to score very high marks. But still they can manage to complete college education and get employed according to their abilities.

With so much diversity in intelligence areas and cognitive profiles among the individuals and an education system designed to favour only a segment of the diverse population, it is unfair to expect all children to perform well in academics and score high marks.

Academic Achievement vs Success

Conventional wisdom tells us that students should get high marks in school to get into a good college, then get high marks in college to get offered a good job, which will then lead to a successful career. It is a fact that many toppers are doing very well in their careers, but the pinnacle they touched earlier and the supremacy they exhibited is just nowhere in sight. At the same time, career success is not exclusive to toppers, but also witnessed by average performers.

Firstly, scoring marks in school and professional success are distinctly different goalposts. Our education system majorly promotes memory skills and lacks application methodology with practical orientation. Moreover, what we learn in school may have no utility or application in industry. Academic achievement just provides the spark for further progress, but it has no assured correlation with continued success in life.

Success means different things to different people. For some, it might mean being at the top of the class, while for others, it could mean pursuing their passion, having a good work-life balance or making a positive impact in the world. It may mean earning more money or respect in society or a simple, satisfied life even without any luxuries. Success is subjective.

Children who score high marks are considered intelligent and it is expected that high marks lead to good colleges and jobs, eventually fetching high earnings and respect. But numerous studies have shown that high marks and intelligence don't ensure a successful life.

Many studies have examined the relationship between grades in school or college and success in life. Success is measured in many ways, such as job success (salary, seniority), personal success (happiness and meaning), the degree of contribution to society and more. The findings were that there is no correlation between grades and success in life. The only correlation found was between grades and academic success. Grades and marks are also considered as indicators of personality traits like hard work and continuous efforts. On the contrary, there is an inverse relationship between grades and innovation. That explains the reason behind many school and college dropouts becoming successful entrepreneurs. Also, marks cannot predict many essential life skills like social skills, emotional intelligence, curiosity to explore and experiment, all of which play a role in life.

The studies demonstrated low positive relationships between academic aptitude and/or grades and accomplishment. The closer the content of the measure of academic aptitude to the demands of the field, the stronger the relationship. (Baird 1985)

School-leaving grades facilitate the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood, independent of educational attainment, and they might enable children from low-SES families to compensate for some of their background disadvantages. (Starr 2024)

A survey study found that there is no correlation between intelligence, respect in society and earnings. It means that being intelligent doesn't ensure more respect or earnings and vice versa. (V. Nidya 2023)

Mass survey research by Jennifer (2020) found that more than 70% of young adults reported that their parents valued, appreciated and loved them more when they were more successful in school and work. 80% of parents believed that 'academic and professional success' was one of the top two priorities of other parents. But only 15% of parents named it as their own first or second priority. The discrepancy shows that while parents actually wanted just happy, productive and fulfilling lives for their kids, they feel stressed and concerned about the social pressure. The child's academic success or failure is viewed as their own success or failure.

This clearly shows that the importance of marks has been over-exaggerated by parents, teachers and society. But the reality paints a different picture.

Education vs Marks

The overemphasis on marks most often hinders children from exploring and developing their other talents in which they might actually have been successful. Those children who fit in well with academics and score well gets too-high an opinion about themselves, leading to very high future expectations by self and others. Such expectations lead to severe disappointment with even a slight deviation or bring in more stress while trying to meet them.

So, if marks are not important, does that mean we stop sending our children to schools? Definitely, not. Education is important to every child. But the overemphasis on scoring high marks should be stopped. The child's abilities, strengths and weakness should be considered and expectations must be set accordingly. There are some children who are average or even excellent with academics. These people would fit very well in the existing education setup. But there are many other children who might have to struggle and put in a huge amount of effort for a below-average mark or just a pass, even while possessing strengths in non-academic

areas. These are two distinct categories, but the mark expectations remain the same for both categories. This expectation can serve as a benchmark and motivation for the high-mark-scoring children (though it can lead to unnecessary pressure as mentioned earlier), whereas for the low-mark-scoring children, it may serve as an unfair expectation, long-term doubt of self-worth, miserable school life and low self-esteem in the future too.

Academic Achievement vs Self-Concept

Self-concept is the image we have of ourselves. It is influenced by many forces, including our interaction with the important people in our lives. It is how we perceive our behaviour, abilities, and unique characteristics.

Research has supported the belief that there is a persistent and significant relationship between self-concept and academic achievement, and the change in one seems to be associated with a change in other. (Marsh 1992; Marsh and Craven, 1987) The impact of academic failure on the self-concept of the students may be considerably negative. Rosenberg (1995) stated in their study that children with poor academic self-concepts are often described as having low self-esteem.

Suicide due to exam failure by young people has been noted more frequently in Asian countries compared to Western countries. In Asia, academic excellence is held in high esteem and is viewed as a means of ensuring a successful future. In 2022, India reported 2248 suicide deaths by students due to exam failure. Multiple factors like low self-esteem, high expectations, impulsivity and learning disabilities play a role in exam failure suicides. Over-anxious and over-ambitious parents, criticisms, comparisons with peers and lack of support in the family increase suicidal risk. (Vijayakumar L 2024) According to a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation report (2018), excessive pressure to excel was reported as one of the top environmental conditions negatively impacting adolescent wellness.

Suggestions to deal with low academic achievement

Being a topper in class is not the only path to success or happiness. It is important to focus on one's strengths, pursue one's passions, develop life skills, and maintain a balance between academic and personal life to achieve overall success and fulfilment. While academic achievement is important, it is not the only measure of success.

Parents must consider the abilities, strengths and weakness of the child. The efforts of the child must be acknowledged irrespective of the outcome. Necessary support must be provided to reduce the impact of weakness. At some point, parents must accept the child's performance level and stop pushing beyond the child's abilities. As a quote says, "Parent the child you have, not the child you wish you had."

A study analysed the strategies that underachievers used to maintain their self-esteem at an acceptable level. Results show that self-esteem is maintained through positive self-representations in non-academic facets of self-concept and/or by devaluing school-related competencies. It is not enough to devalue academic self-concept in order to maintain a positive sense of worth. It also seems that this requires positive self-perceptions in non-academic dimensions of self-concept. (Peixoto 2010)

The other talents of the child must be explored and encouraged. The child may even consider getting employed or becoming an entrepreneur in their fields of interest and abilities, in the future, after completing basic school and college education.

For children with low academic performance, other flexible options of schooling, like NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling) can be considered. It offers convenience and flexibility to choose from a wide range of subjects. Simultaneously, their non-academic strengths and talents must be encouraged. To continue college degree education, flexible options like IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University) and TNOU (Tamil Nadu Open University) can be considered. These options can help the child achieve school and college education in a stress-free way, along with a focus on developing his/her real talents.

Conclusion

Education must be seen as a way to enhance our knowledge and a gateway to open more opportunities and must be made available to every child. It should not be used, either intentionally or unintentionally, as a means to differentiate and discriminate among children, leading to a decreased sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

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