FEATURED ARTICLE

School Failure: An Exploratory Observational Study in Omani Schoolgirls

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The objective of this study was to find the prevalence and psychosocial correlates of school failure among schoolgirls in Muscat and its suburbs in a randomly selected cohort of 708 girls from three state elementary schools (grades 1 –6). Students were examined with various parameters to elicit some of their behavioral, cognitive and social correlates of school failure. Socio-demographic information was sought from relevant sources. Objective assessment measures were administered to the subjects including Arabic versions of the short form of Conners’ Teacher Rating Scale (CTRS) to measure hyperactivity, and Raven’s Progressive Matrices (RPM) as a measure of intelligence. Previous years’ school performance data on all subjects were examined and those with a history of school failure (inability to pass the grades) were identified. In addition, the indices of all students’ performance in Arabic and Mathematics in the first semester were obtained. Based upon the above data, girls who scored ≥ 15 on CTRS constituted the hyperactive group; 5-8 points/12 in RPM represented average intelligence group, scores of < 50% in Arabic and/or Mathematics in the first semester were considered as the poor current semester performers, and the girls who failed one year or more during the previous years were constituted the “previously school failing” group. Approximately 23% (n=161) of the subjects had one year or more of school failures. The school-failure-group manifested more behavioral problems than the rest such as hyperactivity and aggression. Larger family size and lower parental education significantly predicted school failure. Indices of intellectual functioning among those with a history of school failure were comparatively lower than their consistently successful counterparts. The present study suggests that various psychosocial pathology other than mere lack of intelligence correlate with the observed high levels of school failure in Omani girls. These psychosocial correlates dovetail with previous studies conducted elsewhere, and need to be addressed for effective remedial interventions.

Key Terms: School Failure, ADHD, Behavioral Problems, Child Psychiatry, Omani Girls, Conduct Disorder

Literacy is becoming increasingly recognized as an important objective in improving socioeconomic conditions and self-determination (Bahgat, 1999). As awareness of the ubiquity of learning disorders becomes important in the drive for illiteracy eradication, a considerable body of the research has focused on association between demographic factors and discrepant achievement by children whose underachievement does not reflect their intellectual ability. In addition, such children have been documented to exhibit various behavioral and emotional problems (Buka & Earls, 1993). Studies from elsewhere (e.g. Borowsky, Ireland, & Resnick, 2002) suggest that a boy suffering academic failure is likely to be a “bright but lazy boy, coming from a non-academically inclined home” (Oakland & Stern, 1989). One leading authority in the field has suggested that such children should not be treated as “imbeciles” or “incorrigible” (Levy, Harper, & Weinberg, 1992). Various etiological mechanisms that underline underachieving children have been proposed during the long history of inquiry of such children (Levy, Harper, & Weinberg, 1992). In the absence of overt cerebral insult, various terms have been proposed to define the problems of such children but the concept of school failure appears to be more descriptive, heuristic and
functional (Dumas et al., 1999). School failure, regardless of the cause, indicates the pupil’s inability to cope with school commitments as normal children do. It is considered as a behavioral problem (Al-Sharbati, Younan, & Sudani, 1998; Huertas et al., 1999) but with various psychosocial correlates (Dykman, Casey, Ackerman, & McPherson, 2001; Masi, Brovedani, & Poli, 1998). Previous studies worldwide suggest that the causes of school failure in children are usually multifaceted, numerous and overlapping (Corman, 2003; Levy, Harper, & Weinberg, 1992; Li, 2003; Vander, Weiss, Kuo, Cheney, & Cohen, 2003).

Many studies have revealed that gender is an important variable in school failure, with boys often outperformed by girls. However, little has been documented from developing countries where 80% of the world population resides and whose population structure has preponderance of children (Arab Human Development Report, 2002; Lambourne, 1990). In Western countries, it has been estimated that 2% of children would manifest a 50% discrepancy between their intellectual functioning and academic performance (Oakland & Stern, 1989). However, little is known about the rate of school failure and its psychosocial correlates in developing countries.

Oman’s socio-cultural constitution offers fertile ground for exploring cross-cultural manifestation of school failures as well as laying the groundwork for testing to determine whether discrepant achievement is culturally reactive or a culture-specific phenomenon. Once considered the ‘Tibet of Arabia’ due to its isolation and ultra traditional society, Oman has experienced a rapid transition to a modern state (Allen & Rigsbee, 2000; Smith, 1988). Oman’s recent affluence has precipitated rapid population growth (Birks, 1976; Eickelman, 2002) and its population structure is at the second phase of demographic transition where declining death rates and high birth rates rapidly increase the population. Oman has a wide-based age pyramid. In 2001, 42.3% of the population of 1.8 million Omani nationals was under the age of 14 (Winckler, 2002). With this large young population base, a 3.3% population growth and 32 births/1,000 populations, there has been speculation about a ‘baby boom’ (Al-Rawahi & Sharts-Hopko, 2002; Eickelman, 1993; UNICEF, 2003). This means that the country will have to cater to the needs of its growing population of children. The identification of descriptive characteristics of school failure merits attention on several counts. In a developing country like Oman, traditional modes of living have been modified by acculturation and modernization (Sulaiman, Al-Riyami, Farid, & Ebrahim, 2001). Education appears to remain one of the principal channels for one’s social mobility, path for meaningful employment and self-actualization. Oakland and Stern (1989) have suggested that from heuristic perspectives, descriptive characteristics of school failure may point in the direction of the most fruitful avenues for future research in the area as well as highlight some psychosocial factors that could be used in assisting early identification and contemplation of essential remedial services. Identification of children who are at a high risk for failure at preschool age is of vital importance in preventing social stratification and poverty (Eapen, al-Gazali, Bin-Othman, & Pramathan, 1998; Fidone, 1975). High failure means increased repetition rates, leading to longer periods spent at different stages of education. In addition to the high financial cost, school failure does not only entail a reduced conduit for social advancement but also severely depresses much-needed human resources that could assist in national development. Early diagnosis of the causes of school failure, followed by adequate and suitable intervention and follow-up, would likely prevent many disastrous consequences of that common problem, at the individual, family and community levels. Failure in school has also been shown to be a strong predictor of social misfitness and various other psychosocial impairments (Brier, 1989; Gordon, 1993; Robinson, Rapport, & Jane, 1999). Meanwhile, emerging evidence from different parts of the world has strongly suggested that education is one of the principal empowements for females (Al-Sharbati, Al-Lawatiya, Al-Adawi, Martin, & Al-Hussaini, 2003).

In a paternalistic society such as that of Oman, women have traditionally played a domestic role. The gender role has been depicted as being related with women's biological imperatives (Obermeyer, 1992). However, the recent trend of modernization and the spread of education have brought new roles and opportunities for women (Al-Riyami, Warren, & McElwee, 2002; King-irani, 1995). Despite the cultural constraints, women in Oman have infiltrated positions that were once considered to be the domain of males (Al-Lamki, 2000). Many have suggested that the current trend in Omani schools is that females’ performance is significantly better than that of their male counterparts (Spencer, 1994; Sulaiman & El-Mneizel, 1999). While documented gender-related over achievement should be welcomed at the beginning, more studies are needed to quantify the rate of school failures in females. With universal free education in Oman for the last three decades, little is known about how Omani children fare in educational settings. Prior to the mid 1970’s, modern education was largely non-existent except for a few schools located in the urban areas for dispensing primary education to boys. As Arab countries suffer from a severe shortage of detailed data and information necessary to undertake comprehensive examination of human development...
(Arab Human Development Report, 2002), studies to examine the rate of failure and its psychosocial correlates would be helpful in readdressing the problem. The present study aims to explore the prevalence and psychosocial correlates of school failure among a random cohort of schoolgirls attending elementary state-schools in the Muscat area.

### Methods

This community-based, cross-sectional study was conducted during the spring of 2000 in Muscat (the capital of Oman) and its suburbs. Three public elementary schools for girls were selected randomly, from which 708 schoolgirls (aged 6-13 years) attending first to sixth grades (equal proportions from each grade), constituted the subjects of this study. The selected schools represented all strata of Omani society. This urban area in the rapidly developing traditional society of Oman includes all heterogeneous ethnic and culture groupings of Oman including a very large number of expatriates, therefore this may not directly necessary represent proportional strata of the traditional Omani society. Almost all the girls were Omani nationals.

After the approval of Sultan Qaboos University (Project No. MREC-122 in 29th Jan. 2000), and the Ministry of Education, the nature and objective of the study were explained to the principals of the schools. Thereafter the teachers and social workers who had come to know the girls well during five months of the fall semester were approached for help in quantifying their students’ behavioral characteristics. Teachers were asked via a questionnaire prepared using a structured scale, to write down their opinion on a number of questions regarding the girls’ attention span, hyperactivity and impulsivity. During piloting, both content and criterion-related validity and scorer/rater reliability were deemed adequate as there was striking consensus between different raters. In addition to the structured assessment, teachers were also requested to provide their subjective view of their pupils’ behavior in writing regarding aggression, stealing and lying in the class. Aggression was operationalized as any behavior that was intended to harm others in the form of retaliation, breaking the rules of games, possession of toys, equipment and/or territory. Stealing was defined as using or attempting to use unauthorized assistance, material, or equipment while preparing for, or working on an examination or other academic assignment as well as trying to gain material benefit without the consent of the owner. Lying on the other hand, was defined as a conscious attempt to deceive others. Responses were in the form of “yes” or “no”. Social workers also assisted in providing children's demographic and school achievement variables from school records and in verifying information if this was not readily available.

After obtaining their verbal consent, invitations were extended to the students to take part in a formal test of intellectual functioning during class time. All students were explicitly informed that their participation or non-participation would not in any way affect their grade or how the teacher would evaluate them, and if they participate in the test, their scores would remain anonymous and would not affect their grades or examination results. To avoid peer influence, students were not allowed to discuss the test amongst themselves. Responses from students with known sensory or cognitive impairments serious enough to affect the proper completion of the questionnaire were excluded from the analysis.

### Academic and Demographic Correlates

Various academic and demographic characteristics including the child’s birth order among her siblings, family size, parental educational status and school performance in the first semester in mathematics and Arabic were recorded. Any history of school failure in previous year(s) was also registered. The prevailing academic performance of “previous school failure” group was also explored in order to take into account those students who may have been flourishing at the time the study was conducted but previously might have had some poor performance. Without this stringent criterion, the data would have been unreliable. Arabic and mathematics grades of the prevailing semester were sought to reflect students’ overall academic status, since mother tongue and mathematics are fundamentals of any basic education and transcend cultural barriers. Students who scored lower than 50% in the first semester in any one of the two subjects were classified within “poor current semester performer” group, while those who have failed one or more years were considered to be the “previously school failing” group.

### Conners’ Teacher Rating Scale (CTRS)

The short form of the Conners’ Teacher Rating Scale (CTRS) (Al-Sharbati, Younan, & Sudani, 1998; Conners, Sitarenios, Parker, & Epstein, 1998) was used to determine symptoms of ADHD according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The short form of the CTRS consists of 10 items concerning different aspects of the child’s behavior including hyperactivity, disruptive behavior, attention problems, mood fluctuation, etc. Experienced behavioral scientists produced an Arabic version of the
TABLE 1: Relationships between previous School Failure (in years), and both current school achievement (semester results) and anti social behavior.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School Failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Failed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pass</strong></td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not Pass</strong></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**X² = 67.31, p < .001**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hyperactive Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**X² = 10.17, p < .01**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aggressive behavior</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**X² = 9.31 (p < .01)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stealing and Lying behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**X² = 7.52, p < .01**

The CTRS is a commonly used research and clinical tool for assessing children’s behavior in the classroom and in hospitals (Al-Sharbati, Al-Hussaini, & Sajjeev, 2003; Al-Sharbati, Younan, & Sudani, 1998; Conners, Sitarenios, Parker, & Epstein, 1998; Farre-Riba & Narbona, 1997; Montiel-Nava et al., 2002). Previous studies conducted in the Arab world have confirmed the validity of the short form of CTRS that is used in this study (Al-Sharbati, Younan, & Sudani, 1998). The teachers who were considered to be the most competent in assessing individual child’s behavior (Foye, 1990; Kinsbourne, 1985), rated the children on descriptors of behavior covering conduct problems, learning problems, impulsivity and hyperactivity.

Raven’s Progressive Matrices Intelligence Test (RPMT)

To measure intellectual functioning, an abbreviated version of Raven’s Progressive Matrices, a non-verbal intelligence test, was administered to the pupils on a group base (Raven, 2000). The reliability (internal consistency and test–retest stability) has an alpha of 0.88 for the total scores. To save time, all the girls were shown transparencies of the Raven items in their respective classrooms. The responses were given on individual answer sheets. No child was labeled or identified as having “low intelligence” or “hyperactive behavior” as indexed by CTRS in front of other students or their teachers to avoid shaming them. For the present purposes, students were classified into three groups: below average (0-4 points/12), average (5-8/12), and above average (9-12/12). Raven’s Progressive Matrices test has been shown to be effective in identifying intelligence functioning in various cultural populations (Al-Sharbati, Al-Lawatiya, Al-Adawi, Martin, & Al-Hussaini, 2004; Benjasuwantep, Ruangdaraganon, & Visudhiphan, 2002).
TABLE 2: The Relationship Between Previous School Failure and Raven’s Intelligence Test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Failure</th>
<th>Below Average</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Above Average</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>69.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the SPSS program. Descriptive statistics were computed. Chi-square tests (Pearson and linear trends) were used to study the statistical significance. The results were considered significant when the $p$ is 0.05 or less.

Results

In the present analysis, the schoolgirls were operationalised as either “previously school failing” (PSF) or “control” according to their performance in the previous years. The control group, for brevity, constituted those schoolgirls who had not failed before and had not repeated any school year. One hundred and sixty one (22.7%) schoolgirls out of 708, had failed at least once during the previous year(s); among them 41 (25%) girls had failed in more than one year. Table 1 shows the relationships between school failure (in years) and the performance in Arabic and/or mathematics in the first semester. 37 pupils (22.9%) of the (PSF) group ($n = 161$) performed poorly in the first semester in one and/or two subjects, compared with 18 (3.2%) of the control group ($n = 547$). This difference has a high statistical significance ($p < 0.001$). In this study, the (PSF) group exhibited more hyperactive behavior as indexed by the CTRS (16 out of 161; 9.9%) than the control group (20/547; 3.7%). This result is statistically significant ($p = .001$). Antisocial behavior, (assessed by the subjective behavioral questionnaire appended to CTRS), was more commonly observed among the (PSF) group (aggression, $n = 13$, 8%; stealing and lying, $n = 11$, 6.8%) than the control group ($n = 15$, 2.7% and $n = 13$, 2.4% respectively). These associations have statistical significance too ($p < .01$).

TABLE 3: The Paternal Educational Level of the Schoolgirls.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Failure</th>
<th>Illiterate</th>
<th>Read and write</th>
<th>Preparatory</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>University and above</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X^2$ Linear Trend = 37.55, $p < .001$
The performance on the RPM Test is shown in table 2. Girls in (PSF) group are more represented in the sub-average (<4/12) (n = 17, 10.6%) and average intelligence (4-8/12) (n = 81, 50.3%) than the normal group (n = 15, 2.7% and 181, 33.1% respectively); meanwhile the girls from the control group were over represented in the above average intelligence (>8/12) (n = 351, 64.2%) when compared with the (PSF) group (n = 63, 39.1%). These differences are highly significant statistically (p <.001).

Fathers’ educational level is illustrated in table 3. One third of the fathers of the PSF group were illiterate (n = 52, 32.3%), compared to only 12.9% (n = 71) of the fathers of the control group. Only 10% (n = 17) of the fathers of the PSF group had secondary school education or higher. Whereas more than one third (n = 201, 36.3%) of the fathers of the control group had secondary school or a higher level of education. These differences are significant statistically (p <.001).

A similar trend was observed among the mothers also (Table 4). Illiteracy was more reported among mothers of the PSF group, as about one half of them (47.8%, n = 77,) were illiterate, compared with 30% (n = 165) of the counter group, while higher education was more reported with the mothers of the control group, as 21% (n = 115) had secondary school level or higher education compared with 2.5% (n = 4) of the PSF group (p <.001).

The family characteristics of the girls were shown in Table 5. Although the percentage of the girls with previous school failure who had early birth order (born among the first three) is less than the counter group, and their percentages among the lately born was higher than the other group, these differences are not significant statistically (p >.05). This means that there is no difference in birth order between the two groups. Meanwhile, the school failure group had larger families (as indicated by the number of siblings which might exceed 20 in some of them) than the other group, while those without school failure were over represented in the small families. These differences are statistically significant (p <.001).

Discussion

Past research pertaining to gender and achievement has largely focused on children from industrialized countries of the West (Masi, Brovedani, & Poli, 1998). In developing countries such studies are lacking. To our knowledge, the present study is the first of its kind to examine the characteristics of school failure in Omani schoolgirls. Studies conducted on Euro-American populations have suggested that males suffer more from various ‘culturally devalued’ conditions (such as discrepant achievement) than their female counterparts (Dykman, Casey, Ackerman, & McPherson, 2001). Various surveys have often shown that males were more likely to have behavioral characteristics that prevent them from maximizing their potential in education (Al-Sharbati, Al-Hussaini, & Sajjeev, 2003). However, such generalizations are largely derived from Euro-American populations (Brewis, Schmidt, & Casas, 2003; Gaub & Carlson, 1997), and from studies on mostly males. Some emerging views suggest that the importance of gender in academic achievement is less pronounced beyond elementary schools (Mboya, 1998; Oakland & Stern, 1989; Rech, 1994; Wilgenbusch & Merrell, 1999). However, the pattern of school failure among females has not been explored in developing countries.

As precursor for more comprehensive gender and school performance studies, this study has examined school failure among Omani schoolgirls.
TABLE 5: The Relationships Between Birth Order, Family Size and School Failure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth Order</th>
<th>School Failure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 3</td>
<td>57 (35.4%)</td>
<td>237 (43.3%)</td>
<td>294 (41.5%)</td>
<td>&lt;= 3</td>
<td>57 (35.4%)</td>
<td>237 (43.3%)</td>
<td>294 (41.5%)</td>
<td>X²=3.7, p &gt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>55 (34.2%)</td>
<td>175 (31.9%)</td>
<td>230 (32.5%)</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>55 (34.2%)</td>
<td>175 (31.9%)</td>
<td>230 (32.5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;6</td>
<td>49 (30.4%)</td>
<td>135 (24.6%)</td>
<td>184 (25.9%)</td>
<td>&gt;6</td>
<td>49 (30.4%)</td>
<td>135 (24.6%)</td>
<td>184 (25.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>161 (100%)</td>
<td>547 (99.8%)</td>
<td>708 (99.9%)</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>161 (100%)</td>
<td>547 (99.8%)</td>
<td>708 (99.9%)</td>
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Siblings’ Number

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<tr>
<td>&lt;=3</td>
<td>9 (5.6%)</td>
<td>63 (11.5%)</td>
<td>72 (10.2%)</td>
<td>&lt;=3</td>
<td>9 (5.6%)</td>
<td>63 (11.5%)</td>
<td>72 (10.2%)</td>
<td>X²=26.17, p &lt; .001</td>
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<td>4-6</td>
<td>35 (21.7%)</td>
<td>211 (38.6%)</td>
<td>246 (34.7%)</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>35 (21.7%)</td>
<td>211 (38.6%)</td>
<td>246 (34.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;6</td>
<td>117 (72.7%)</td>
<td>273 (49.5%)</td>
<td>390 (55.1%)</td>
<td>&gt;6</td>
<td>117 (72.7%)</td>
<td>273 (49.5%)</td>
<td>390 (55.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>161 (100%)</td>
<td>547 (100%)</td>
<td>708 (100%)</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>161 (100%)</td>
<td>547 (100%)</td>
<td>708 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aged 6-13 attending grades 1-6. The prevalence of school failure in this study was approximately 23%, a rate that reflects the statistical model of distribution of the Omani population and the patterns observed elsewhere (Levy, Harper, & Weinberg, 1992). However, caution should be exercised as this rate reflects only urban Omani society. There was no logistic means to conduct this study at both rural and urban areas of Oman at this stage, though such undertaking is recommended as a natural extension of the present study. Nevertheless, literature elsewhere generally suggests that the rate of school failure tends to range from 1 to 30% of school age population (Moreno, Ceinos, & Fleitas, 1991). Such variations might be attributed to the differences in the adopted methodology, improved case detection and available means of reporting and increased interest in the subject (Oakland & Stern, 1989). Alternatively, the high variability of prevalence of school failure across studies might suggest that socio-cultural or ecological factors play a substantial role in the occurrence of school failure. Although the present study does not attempt to confirm such a view, some pertinent inferences are worthwhile. Modern education has only recently been introduced in Oman. In this context, it is not clear whether the relatively high prevalence of school failure is due to the fact that the culture of modern education has not been fully consolidated in the country. The present acculturation and modernization in education was generally non-existent in the country until recently. Despite such a late start, Oman has developed one of the most extensive and expensive educational programs in the region, with free public education from kindergarten through higher education (Bahgat, 1999). Annually, Oman spends 3.5% of its GNP to furnish universal free education for boys and girls. Due to these efforts, under the banner “Education for All by the year 2000” literacy now approaches 80% (Ministry of Education, 2001). In 1990/91, the primary gross enrolment rate had reached 95.4%, with the net enrolment rate at the 80.4% mark. Females have been increasingly surpassing males in both enrolment and graduation.

This study found a statistically significant relation between previous school failure and the current semester performance in Arabic and/or mathematics. Albeit indirectly, this study would suggest that an ecologically valid index of pupils’ scholastic aptitudes could be derived from their Arabic and mathematics performance, and could be a worthwhile tool to quantify children’s ability (Al-Adawi, Dorvlo, Burke, Moosa, & Al-Bahlani, 2002).

One implication of this study is that academic underachievers often stand out by their disturbed behavior, an association that have been frequently reported from other parts of the world (e.g. Hinshaw, 1992; Jensen, Martin, & Cantwell, 1997; Klicpera & Schabmann, 1993; Montiel-Nava et al., 2002; Rabiner & Coie, 2000). In this regard, the question remains whether behavioral problems lead to poor academic performance or whether it is the other way around. Even in the presence of adequate intelligence in such children, behavioral and emotional problems on their own may trigger cognitive impairments. Studies have shown that affective and cognitive dysfunctions are among the factors that, independently from one another, influence and predict variations in the indices of intellectual functioning (Al-Adawi, Powell, & Greenwood, 1998). Motivational problems are also likely to play a significant part in academic underachievement (Popper & West, 1999). Inattention, leading to impaired effortful behavior and ability to learn and remember are some contributing factors to impaired motivation (Al-Sharbati, 1987; Willems et al.,...
Some studies have suggested that if appropriate measures are undertaken to enhance the child’s motivation, his/her academic performance will improve consequently (Bouffard, Marcoux, Vezeau, & Bordeleau, 2003).

Attempts have been made to link various aspects of family structure with school failure. Prinz, Dumas, Smith, and Laughlin (2000) has highlighted a complex set of relationships in this regard. On the other hand, some studies (e.g. Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996) have found that family educational characteristics do not distinguish between academic achiever and underachiever. The present study appears to endorse the view that a lower educational level of the parents would impact on children’s academic achievement. It is possible that a child nurtured by illiterate parents would have poor intellectual stimulation resulting in reduced academic ambitions, probably due to the parental unawareness about schooling, on one hand, and their inability to support the child and guide him/her on matters pertaining to schooling on the other hand. This reflects the view that social, cultural and interpersonal deprivations are correlated with failure to thrive, and that rural, isolated and mistreated children have a higher chance of failure than matched stimulated children (O’Connor, 2002; Offord & Poushinsky, 1981; Zolotor et al., 1999).

Alternative to this view, of course, is that some parents would push their children to excel academically. This is becoming increasingly so in societies where traditional identities are being eroded with emerging view that education is the only recourse for social mobility.

The present study also suggests that there is no significant difference in the birth order between schoolgirls with and without school failure. This cross-sectional view appears to be in conflict with some previous studies (e.g. Spota & Paulson, 1995) but congruent with others (e.g. Travis & Kohli, 1995). It is often assumed that children having a low rank in the birth order (being a late-born among siblings) might receive less attention from the parents; who themselves might be advanced in age or ‘burned out’. Alternatively, an increased number of children in the family might lower the caregivers’ ability to dispense a consistent nurturing need to all the children. In support of this view, the present study suggests a significant relationship between a larger family size and school failure. However even if the child has a high birth order (i.e. having a high rank among the siblings), the result of negligence and poor support from the parents’ side is the same as it would be if the number of siblings was high. More research is needed to discern this important issue.

A significant relationship between school failure and the index of intellectual functioning in this study is seemingly consistent with other reports (Dhadphale & Ibrahim, 1984; Levy, Harper, & Weinberg, 1992). Conceptually, the inability to learn and remember is likely to result in difficulties in academic progress. Similarly, behavioral problems among such children are likely to prevent them from fully utilizing their intellectual ability. The association between intellectual ability and school failure might suggest that these children were intellectually impaired, thus leading them to academic failure. Future studies ought to discern what constitutes school failure and learning disability more clearly by evaluating the discrepancy between achievement and aptitude. Oakland and Stern (1989) have suggested that school failure should be evaluated by noting whether school performance is lower than the child’s intellectual functioning. Many studies have suggested that a lower stratum of intellectual capacity is often a barrier for meaningful academic achievement (Garcia Bacete & Rosel Remirez, 2001; Walker, Greenwood, Hart, & Carta, 1994). It is possible that even children who have superior intelligence might be prone to school failure (Al-Sharbati, 1987). However, for these children, and those who are in the borderline area, other factors might play a part in undermining or determining their success in academic setting. This includes other within-child factors (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, lack of motivation, emotional problems, etc), in addition to the family expectation, role of the teacher and value of society in education in general (Comunian, 1993).

Limitations

As is true for most exploratory studies in a society where such studies do not exist, there are various limitations that could limit its generalization. Firstly, information from parents concerning the child’s medical and developmental history is absent. In addition, there are no measures of children’s behavior at their own homes. Previous recommendations suggest that children’s functioning should be assessed from different settings, in addition to school. This would reveal the child’s adaptive behavior, which has been suggested to be important distinguishing criteria for child functioning. Secondly, data collection by questionnaires might pose general problems. Earlier studies have found that different cultures attach different meanings to life, and thus perceive reality differently. Although all the items of the screening instrument were translated to achieve a delicate equivalence in Arabic, its usefulness still may have been hampered by subtle linguistic and conceptual misunderstandings. Thirdly, because of their academic failure, it is likely that some children would not be present in normal schools because successive failure

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would discourage parents from sending their children to school. Hence special education programs are often non-existent in ordinary schools in developing countries, they may send them either to institutes for children with special needs, or to the available alternative form of traditional education, 'madrasa', that offer Islamic education. Conventionally assigned roles of domesticity are often reinforced in traditional communities where girl’s future often hinges them to marital bond. This implies that ‘exceptional children’ would likely not seek regular education. If this has been the case in Oman, the present study will underestimate the true prevalence rate of academic failure among Omani girls. Finally, in line with the view that human behavior is shaped by social and environmental constraints, it might be more pertinent to quantify school failure through culturally sensitive measurements and other locally relevant criteria. Future studies need to use culturally sensitive measurements in order to lay the groundwork for how the range of human behaviors is expressed in different cultures.

Despite these methodological limitations, the present naturalistic observation suggests that 23% of the female students were likely to succumb to school failures. It is worthwhile to speculate on the impact of being an underachiever in an Arabic/Islamic culture such as Oman. School failure is likely to have adverse effects on the child’s overall quality of life. In Oman, where education is a likely path for career development, those who succumb to academic failure are likely to have low self-esteem and to respond negatively to various aspects of their development (Eapen, al-Gazali, Bin-Othman, & Pramathan, 1998; Fidone, 1975; Robinson, Rapport, & Jane, 1999). There is also a reason to believe that some socio-cultural issues are likely to affect negatively those who do not benefit from education. Islam, the predominant religion in Oman, teaches its followers that education is essential for its believers. Hadith (the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings), states at various points that “the seeking of knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, man or women”; “The ink of scholars is more precious than the blood of the martyrs” and “Seek knowledge even it if is found in China” (Ullah, 1963). In spite of such clear guidelines, in a traditional paternalistic society such as that of Oman, it is possible that educated and economically independent women might be considered a threat to the traditional male dominance. In this case, lack of education might even be a valued characteristic in females that would enhance their conjugal status in the traditional society, as it is now emerging that ‘educated’ women are less preferred choice for marriage. However, this perception may arise as educated women are likely to balance work and family rather than doing only previous domestic role (Qian, 1998). Future studies, along with objective measures, ought to explore the impact of culture, education and school failure.

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