

# Teaching Methodology: One of the Factors Affecting Academic Achievement of Secondary Grade Students

Mariyam Nihaadh

## Abstract

Numerous factors affect the academic achievement of students as they undergo the transition of proceeding to secondary grades. This article discusses the findings related to factors affecting the academic achievement of secondary grade students from the students' perspective. A qualitative study was conducted at a secondary school with a sample of students who had experienced a decline in their performance in secondary grades. Respondents were queried with regard to various factors relating to their academic achievement. Issues relating to student motivation were highlighted as the most prominent factors affecting their academic achievement. The findings revealed that students' lack of motivation was the consequence of unvaried and ineffective methodologies adopted by most teachers in delivering the lessons.

**Keywords:** academic achievement, secondary grades, factors, motivation, teaching methodology

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## 1. Introduction

Maldives is an island nation with a chain of 1190 islands scattered across the Indian Ocean. Out of the 1190 islands, only 200 islands are inhabited. Much of the country is covered by sea with only a mere 1% as land. The main form of transport within the country is by sea, although air transport is also available to many parts of the country. However, air transport is not available at affordable prices for the average person, and therefore, most transport is done by sea. Despite the geographical barriers in the country, there is accessible education to all the islands from the largest to the most remote islands. Maldives graduated from a Least Developed Country to the status of a Developing country in 2011 and serves as one of the best countries in providing affordable education to all islands across the nation. Secondary education is a service rendered to all citizens of the country. Education is also provided at the advanced level (higher secondary) and there are 6 schools in Mal'e, the capital, providing higher secondary education whereas there are 38 schools in the atolls providing education at this level. A significant 4237 students were studying at advanced level during the year 2012. Higher Secondary education is provided to all students nationally despite the gender. In 2012, there were 1548 females and 2689 males studying at the higher secondary level (Ministry Of Education, 2012).

## 2. Objectives and aims of the study

One of the major transitions that Maldivian students experience is from the primary to the secondary. In this regard, low level of achievement by students in their secondary grades, despite their excellent achievement in the primary grades, is considered as one of the main problems in the Maldivian students.

The President too, while addressing the nation on the occasion of the Independence Day, raised his concern by stating that our younger generation, on whom lies the future of the country, do not possess the capability of undertaking this responsibility. He exemplified it by stating that over 12,000 school leavers are said to be depending on their parents for a living, despite the secondary schooling they have received (President Nasheed, 2011).

With the understanding that the Maldivian students may be affected by the transition to secondary schooling, this study focussed on the factors that influence students' academic achievement in their secondary grades.

Apart from this, a study done by the researcher in partial fulfilment of the qualitative research module, in a comprehensive (with primary and secondary grades) school in Male' in the year 2010, also confirms that students' results had declined after their promotion to the secondary

school (The Impact of Teachers' Questioning Skills on the Academic Performance of Middle School Students after being promoted to Lower Secondary Grades, 2010).

By determining the factors that contribute to the failure of students to maintain their academic performance after transition to secondary grades, this research will contribute to the Ministry of Education's goals to take measures to reduce these factors and address the issues in particular. The intended audience for this research is all those parties who have been concerned about this issue and all educationalists of the country.

This research will hopefully enable educationalists at all levels of the education system to work towards the development of secondary education in the Maldives.

The aim of this research was to determine the factors that affect the academic achievement of secondary grade students in the Maldivian context. The research has, therefore, studied the extent to which secondary grade students' performance has declined. In this respect, special emphasis has been given to identifying all the relevant factors that contribute to this decline in grades. The topic has been selected for research as it is an area of utmost need for investigation. The ultimate aim of the proposed study was to contribute to the growing body of knowledge by determining the various factors that affect the academic results of students who have scored excellent results in the primary grades, but failed to maintain the same results in the secondary grades. It is hoped that the study would contribute to increasing the students' academic performance in the secondary grades by identifying the factors that affect their performance.

The issue regarding the decrease in the results at secondary grades has been raised by various educationalists and this has been a hot debate in forums and educational gatherings. Much discussion to address this problem has revolved around curriculum developers, textbooks, primary schools, teachers, parents, teacher training institutes, the Ministry of Education, politics and even the media. Nevertheless, the factors for the decline in their academic performance in the secondary grades are yet to be identified, and addressing these factors has become an urgent need.

Furthermore, the transition of students between primary and secondary is an international educational issue which is considered to be of great concern. Although there is evidence of research into transition of students from primary to secondary internationally (Tonkin & Watt, 2003; Berndt, Hawkins & Jiao, 1999), there are no available published studies on the transition from the primary to the secondary in the Maldivian context yet, apart from a few research assignments completed by undergraduate students which prove that there is a decline in grades in secondary schools. According to such an unpublished research conducted on "The difference in results scored by the students at their final stage of Middle School and their initial stage at the Secondary School", it has been proven that students' results in Dhivehi language

had declined to a large degree upon promotion to secondary grades (Afeef, 2006).

As seen from the discussion so far, this is an area of great concern to most people of the Maldives who are either directly or indirectly associated with schools. With this identified need and increasing concern, the study attempts to address the gap by identifying the factors that exist in schools that could negatively affect the academic achievement of students in the secondary grades, and find ways in which the impact could be reduced.

This study will offer guidance to both primary and secondary schools on how to modify their present practices to eliminate the rising concern. It will also contribute to the Ministry of Education's policy level decisions by identifying the causes of this alarming trend.

The study has mainly focused on identifying the factors that influence the academic achievement of secondary grade students in Male', in terms of their overall learning and their achievement. Since the students are the prime agents who are negatively affected by the gap between the primary and the secondary, this study mostly focused on their views, to a large extent, due to time constraints. Moreover, any other factors relating to the students also have been considered, whether they are related to school or home environment or even the society at large.

The time constraints and convenience have limited the study to only one school and to only a few selected students from grade nine. The sample could be obtained only from grade nine from the selected school, and therefore the results have been analysed based on the information gathered from the participants.

### **3. The transition from primary to secondary grades**

Primary education tends to be rather different from secondary education due to the nature of the former concentrating on developing students in their basic skills and developing them socially, emotionally and aesthetically, whereas the latter pays more attention to subject matter and is delivered more abruptly and lessens the involvement of the students (Berliner, 1993, in Tonkin & Watt, 2003). This results in the students having to undergo the challenges of being in a completely new environment compared to the school life they had been experiencing since childhood. For Maldivian students, the new international curriculum they are introduced to in the first year of secondary school (Grade 8) is an additional burden to the new pool of teachers, increasing their stress. Situations such as this are further worsened according to Bempechat (1992), by the decreasing role of involvement of parents in their children's educational lives, which is true with regard to Maldivian students as well.

The Ministry of Education aims to increase the number of passes at the ordinary level examinations at the end of lower secondary schooling. However, despite numerous efforts and large sums of money invested in the process, the same trend of underperformance has prevailed in the country's educational history, although there are a handful of students who also accomplish outstanding results at the international level. According to the Ministry of Education (2011), the students who passed in at least five subjects accounted for no more than 32 percent of the population who sat for the GCE Ordinary Level exam in the year 2010. This tends to be alarming compared to the scenario one would observe at the prize giving ceremonies of primary schools at the end of grade seven, when most students seem to perform really well.

To further confirm these observations, the results of grade nine students and grade seven students of the same school were compared. The comparison revealed that while 76.10% students had scored either A, B or C grades in the primary grade, only 44.50% students were able to maintain A, B or C grades or at least a pass grade for the average of the subjects being studied. "My daughter completed grade seven with an honour-listed report, but got a B report in grade eight even during the first term which demotivated her and spoilt her studies and even caused her to lose interest in other activities held in the school," said a disappointed parent.

### **3.1 Student Motivation in Studies**

Motivation, being the force or influence that causes someone to do something, is an important element that can get the students to work hard in their studies. There are two types of goals that are described in an environment, according to the Achievement Goal Theory (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1996 & Pintrich, 2000, as cited in Deemer, 2004). The difference between these two types is such that mastery goals drive the individual towards achievement in order to develop their own competence, whereas performance goals engage the students in behaviour to demonstrate their competence (Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan & Midgley, 2002 as cited in Deemer, 2004). When mastery goals are emphasised, it encourages the students to set standards for their own performance and become motivated in accepting challenging situations. In the case of performance goals, students only work hard as they believe they are unable to perform due to lack of ability.

Given the situation of Maldivian students, it is very important that we encourage our students to set goals which could motivate them, and in turn improve their academic achievement. It is also essential that teachers encourage students to choose the right type of goals, since Pintrich and Schunk (2002) criticise the use of performance goals to make students compare their performance with that of others, and thereby avoid taking on challenging achievement experiences. Kumar, Gheen and Kaplan (2002) in Deemer (2004) state the risk of these types

of goals in putting students in academic struggles where they might finally result in becoming school drop outs in their secondary grades. This underlines the necessity of instilling the right motivation in students to perform better in their secondary grades.

### **3.2 Pedagogical Content Knowledge**

Teachers are said to play a major role in affecting students' academic achievement and Hattie (2003) argues that they occupy about 30 percent of the variance related to academic achievement. Teachers tend to continuously enrol themselves in workshops, seminars, conferences, short courses or other programmes for their professional development. One of the main reasons they opt for this is to upgrade themselves, which in turn helps them to be better teachers. Those teachers who choose to build a substantial amount of specialised knowledge for this purpose, are known to be good teachers. Hill et al. (2004) in Adedoyin (2011) refers to this type of knowledge as Pedagogical Content Knowledge. The word 'pedagogy' here refers to the approaches, methods or techniques used in delivering the subject matter and the word 'content' refers to the subject matter itself. Therefore, this type of knowledge is crucial for every teacher who enters a classroom, in order to make learning happen. Coleman et al. (1996) as cited in Coon, Carey, Fulker and DeFries (1993) state that among the factors related to the academic achievement of students, the methods of discipline and control adopted by the teacher, emphasizing active instruction, providing an open and friendly atmosphere, having well-defined goals and having higher expectations for achievement by students, as elements which showed the strongest relation to achievement.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge enables the teacher to be able to transform the subject matter into meaningful learning outcomes for the students. Moreover, it gives the teacher the ability to explain topics and concepts so that they would make sense to students. Hence, this becomes vital for teachers, as having the knowledge of content matter alone is not sufficient to improve the academic achievement of students, but it also requires the knowledge of various teaching methods, skills and knowledge of child development (Hill, et al. 2004, in Adedoyin, 2011). In this respect, all teacher training institutes in the Maldives offer modules under various names, namely "Teaching Methodology" or "Pedagogical Content Knowledge" or modules specific to subjects or subject areas, like "Principles and Practice in TESL Methodology" or "Methodology in Teaching Mathematics" to train teachers in this aspect.

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1 Research Method**

This research is based on the naturalistic inquiry approach, which, according to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), is a design where the participants' view will be given emphasis, and the research

design chosen for this study is Qualitative research design.

## **4.2 Population and Sample**

Due to the nature and aims of the study, the sample was selected on the basis that participants are those who have scored well in the primary grades but whose results have dropped in the secondary. Therefore, the sample for this study is purposive. The sample consisted of students studying in grade nine at present, in a co-ed school. The results of grade seven students at the end of 2009, grade eight students at the end of 2010, and the first term results of grade nine students in 2011 were compared in order to select the sample from among these students. A sample of twelve students was selected from the students in whose results the changes were evident. The participants' ages ranged from 14-16 years. The participant group included both males and females, and including a cross section of the subject streams they were studying was ensured in selecting the sample. The research was conducted with full approval from the respective school, Ministry of Education, and the Research Ethics Committee of Villa College.

## **4.3 Instrumentation**

The design for the research being qualitative, data was collected primarily through interviews to develop and relate categories of information to portray general explanations (Creswell, 2005). A few broad, open-ended questions were used to gather data based on the aspects derived from the operational framework. They were used to interview the participants who were probed and asked additional questions as inquiries arose. The instrument was prepared considering the research questions, the findings from the literature review and the results of the students obtained in the initial stage. The instrument was pilot-tested as well as reviewed by a panel of experts for its validity and reliability.

## **4.4 Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection consisted of two stages, of which the first stage involved document analysis. The second stage of data collection included interviews and observations.

The purpose of the document analysis was solely to gather statistical data to select the sample for the interviews. The interviews were in-depth one-to-one interviews, through which the issue was explored from the students' perspective. The interviews were conducted in the selected school to ensure natural settings for the participants. This also enabled the researcher to gather additional information to confirm the students' views through observations during these visits. The descriptive and reflective field notes from the observations further enriched the data gathered. Since the study utilises descriptive data that was collected during interviews

and from field observations, this data has then been used to answer the research questions using apparent themes that relate to the issue (Cresswell, 2005).

## 5. Findings

The findings are presented according to the aspects relating to teaching methodology as derived from the students' responses and the field observations. In this regard, the findings regarding teaching methodology in the secondary grades and teaching methodology as a motivating factor to achieve well, have been presented from the students' perspective.

### 5.1 Teaching Methodology in the Secondary Grades

This theme was derived from the factors highlighted by students as affecting academic achievement. Table 1 summarises the responses of the students regarding the teachers.

*Table 1 – Students' responses regarding teachers*

Teacher Behaviour	Agree	Disagree
Teach well	4	5
Explained on request	3	6
Conduct extra classes	8	1

According to the interviews, the students were dissatisfied with the help they get from some of the teachers. However, almost all the students agreed that the school arranges extra classes for them. Despite this unanimous response, more than half the respondents claimed that these extra classes were not of much help to them, due to the manner in which they were being conducted and also the classes being rushed towards the end of the term. The inappropriate methods used in teaching were discovered in the field observations done on 11. 10. 2011.

*"...was another class of grade nine where all the students were very nicely seated and the teacher was discussing the answers to some revision questions. And in another class of grade nine, during a Physics lesson, the teacher was sitting amidst the students while they were doing some work given on the board. She was also seated along with the group. However, in a class where a gentleman was delivering an Islam lesson, the students were seated and the teacher was reading from the textbook. The students did not seem to show much interest and some were seated without opening their books and some others did not even bother to look in the teacher's direction...." (Quoted from the field notes.)*

It is also evident from the student interviews that the students were not happy with the way they were being taught.

*“They were the teachers who used to teach us in grade seven mostly. They were not well-qualified to explain, especially my Maths teacher in grade eight. She also got promoted from grade seven with us, but we don’t understand a thing when she explained. And the lessons were so boring. I mean it, really.” (Excerpt from student interview.)*

Students, when asked about the subjects they were studying, showed no concern regarding the subjects, instead highlighting the way in which these subjects were taught.

*Student A: “No, it’s not to do with any particular subject, but all subjects have some difficult topics in them. That’s what makes them difficult. Sometimes we just learn some things but it’s very difficult to understand them. We manage to get the answer somehow or the other, but don’t understand them.”*

*Student B: “Actually last year it was really bad, we didn’t get extra classes also even if we asked. But this year it has improved a lot. Explanations are also not very good. I believe when we are doing science subjects we should be able to do our practicals as well, but we are hardly taken to the lab, to tell you the truth.” (Excerpts from student interviews.)*

## 5.2 Teaching Methodology as a Motivating Factor

The most prominent factor affecting their achievement, as perceived by the students, was their lack of motivation to study. A large percentage of students associate this with the uninteresting lessons and uninteresting teaching methods, discernible from the interviews.

Students were asked questions to see their level of motivation. More than half the students in the sample agreed that they are not motivated to study due to continuous efforts which have ended in failure, although the rest of the students say that they are motivated and do really hard work. They former attribute this to not being able to understand the lessons, however hard they study.

*“I try my best. I fix schedules and try to sit to study, but sometimes I forget and then spend time watching TV or doing other things. So, maybe not my best. I think I can still work harder and do better. But I don’t feel like working on my studies.” (Excerpt taken from an interview.)*

It was also gathered from the previous interviews that they did not understand much of the lessons that were being explained in class.

*“I think it’s because I’m not doing enough work like I used to. You know, however much I want to improve my results, I don’t know how I can do it.” (Excerpt taken from student interview.)*

## 6. Discussion

The results of the interviews and the observations illustrate commonalities when it comes to teaching methodology. The students' claims are validated with the evidence from the documentary evidence collected, which also brings to our notice that the students tend to perform extraordinarily poorly compared to their primary grades. Therefore, there is no doubt that there is a reason for this decline in their academic performance. However, it should be noted that this study only explores these factors from a student perspective and the results may vary with responses regarding these factors from other stakeholders such as teachers, school management and that of parents. Teaching methodology is seen to have a great impact on the academic achievement of the students in the secondary grades. Numerous comparisons have been made by the students regarding how the lessons are delivered in the primary and secondary grades.

In the interviews students have strongly emphasised the role of teachers as a key factor that affects their academic achievement. Several studies (Brophy, 1979; Centra & Potter, 1980; Glasman & Biniaminov, 1981; Good, 1979; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Stockard & Mayberry, 1985) have highlighted this viewpoint by stating the importance of teacher performance in the academic achievement of the student. Students' responses revealed that some teachers' explanations were not clear, that some teachers still tend to use traditional methods of instruction, and the observations discovered that their lessons are significantly teacher-centred. In addition to this, the students also stated that some teachers are too impatient to explain the same thing to a student twice or do not possess the appropriate skills to manage the classroom. They also complained about teachers not being well-qualified to teach certain subjects, and expressed their dissatisfaction with the way lessons were delivered. Methods of discipline adopted by the teacher and emphasising active instruction were included in a report by Coleman et al. (1966), as cited in Coon, Carey, Fulker & DeFries (1993), as being among the elements that showed the strongest relation to academic achievement. Therefore, it can be concluded that teachers are one of the most prominent factors that affect the academic achievement of students in secondary grades.

The subjects studied in the secondary grades have not been identified as a factor that affected their academic achievement, since students are generally satisfied with the subjects they have chosen to study. However, there are also numerous complaints regarding the vague and meaningless explanations given by some teachers, which are further worsened by the disruptive behaviour of uninterested students due to the teachers' mismanagement of the class. This was exacerbated due to the content being difficult to understand and the change in the style of assessment in the secondary grades compared to the primary grades.

Thus, it can be concluded that the teachers, methodology adopted by teachers in teaching, the styles of assessing in the secondary grades, peers, classroom environment and methods used by teachers for disciplining students are important factors that affect the academic achievement of students in the secondary grades.

On being asked questions regarding the students' motivation, it was revealed that their motivation was low both at home and at school, due to various reasons. The students' responses have proven that their efforts to score better academic results have continuously resulted in failures. However, it is notable that students did not have proper goals and that their targets were out of reach. According to all the students who have got very low results, they were trying to get 'A' reports the next term, which is not realistic, indicating that the students have not been helped in setting realistic goals. In a report by Coleman et al. (1996), as cited by Coon, Carey, Fulker & DeFries (1993), it was stated the teacher has an important role in having well-defined goals for their students and have expectations for their students' achievements.

Students' responses stated that they set targets for each subject at the beginning of each term based on the previous term's results and work towards achieving them. However, the teachers fail in their duty of increasing students' academic achievement if they are unable to discuss the targets with the students to see if they are realistic or not. It is the role of the teachers to convince the students to set targets which are attainable, so that their self-concepts are improved due to the sense of achievement they get at the end of the term for being able to reach the targets. Moreover, it would thereby help to increase the students' motivation as they would have more belief in themselves regarding what they can achieve. The set targets also would be of more worth to the students if the teacher discusses them with the students and reflects back on the targets at the end of every term.

Therefore, it is evident that the schools can play an important role in motivating the students to perform academically better than they are doing at present.

## 7. Conclusion

Maldivian students have performed outstandingly in the GCE O' Level exams in recent years. However, this performance is displayed by only a minority of the population that sits for the exams. Numerous students tend to do poorly in the secondary grades owing to numerous factors. According to the students' negative opinions in terms of teacher assistance and encouragement, content, assessment methods, classroom's physical condition and the behaviour of some of their peers in the class have been discovered. Students showed a significant dissatisfaction towards the teaching methodology adopted by the teachers. The study suggests that schools

tend to play a crucial role as a factor that affects the academic achievement of students in the secondary grades.

The students were seen to have little or no motivation towards their studies. It was also noticed that schools do not seem to play a sufficient role in motivating the students and building their self-esteem. Emphasis has been given to conducting extra classes and guiding students, but in this venture, a very important aspect of guidance, through motivation and encouraging the students to develop a self-realisation of their potential has been ignored. More attention has to be directed towards the psychological aspects, such as developing students' self-esteem and their self-worth. In this regard, teachers need to develop the students' metacognitive awareness and help students in using metacognitive strategies to aid them in their studies.

The findings of this study have provided important implications for secondary schools. The schools and all those respective authorities that have control over the schools, such as the Ministry of Education and the School Boards, have to ensure that these issues regarding the methodology of teaching as outlined in the findings of this study are addressed appropriately.

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