

Failure to get Admissions in a Discipline of their own Choice: Voices of Dejected Students

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Abstract

Attaining a professional engineering degree is a dream of many pre-engineering intermediate students in Pakistan. Several students face scarcity of resources to accomplish and enliven their dreams of getting admission into an engineering institute, which results in great hardships and turmoil for them. The literature reveals that quantitative work in this area has been done to some extent, which restricts the comprehension of deeper understanding, profound feelings, perceptions, personal meanings, effects and experiences surrounding this dilemma at the time of rejection. This study has tried to ferret out the experiences of the students who could not get admission in the field of their own interest and went through the phase of uncertainty concerning their future. The research is grounded in the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology as guided by Heidegger (1962), Gadamer (1960/2003), Casey (1993) and Levinas (1961/2004). By calling forth the philosophical and methodological tenets of this approach, the endeavor was to uncover the lived experiences of the students at the time of failure as well as how they felt about their future. A group of five students from

the University of Karachi (Department of Statistics), who could not qualify in the Entrance test of a well renowned Engineering University in Karachi and later joined BS program in Actuarial Sciences, were interviewed for this research. The insights of the study reflect that lack of opportunities and failure result in a great set back for the students and harbor negative feelings in them towards education and its system. The study recommends the need to establish new public sector universities to fulfill the needs of the students to achieve their targets and simultaneously to groom them as an asset for the country.

Keywords: engineering, hermeneutic phenomenology, professional aspirations, tertiary level

Introduction

Disruption or potential failure in any walk of life can have profound implications for those involved; it can damage self esteem, reduce the capacity to persevere and can disturb others around the individual who have experienced failure. Failure is an important and personal event in the life of a student (Gracia & Jenkins, 2002). According to Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982), failures in educational life have significant effects on social and personal lives of the students. It has been surprising that very little effort has been put in Pakistan to understand the experiences of students who dream of attaining a professional degree of their choice, but at the completion of twelve years of education, they face the challenge to get themselves enrolled into a professional university of their choice. Literature reveals that much of the work on student performance is quantitative, restricting understanding of the deeper

feelings and perceptions of students towards their studies (Gracia & Jankens, 2002). High level of competition for the university seats due to increased number of candidates does not allow the majority of students to achieve their goal of becoming engineers.

The engineering university considered for the study is National Engineering University (NEU, pseudonym) is considered a landmark university for students who aim to pursue their careers in engineering. It is considered valuable if engineers are alumni of NEU and are considered appropriate for the job market and from the outset prepare themselves to get a place amongst those who get top merit to enroll in NEU. Unfortunately, the number of applicants to enroll in engineering programs is increasing each year, but many engineering universities have not been established to cater to the needs of the students. The entrance merit at NEU swirls from 78 % to 80 % in the intermediate examination, with an additional aptitude test. It becomes very difficult and increases the competition on the basis of number game for the interested students. At the end of the formal aptitude test, when the final merit list is disclosed, hundreds of students who have the potential to become engineers are left to seek other professions. Although there are many factors which are involved in this practice and which need to be explored, addressed and fixed, this phenomenological research has been conducted to explore the experiences of students who were rejected by a very small margin in getting admissions in NEU.

The paucity of public sector universities discourages students who belong to middle and lower middle class to join a profession of their own choice. Thus, academic failure creates

financial and emotional issues for students, with associated resource and performance implications for higher education institutions (Gracia & Jankens, 2002). Neff, Hsieh and Dejitterat (2005) state that self-compassion entails being kind to oneself in instances of failure, perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience and holding painful feelings in mind. Ojo and Owoyele (2011) opine that students attribute academic failure more towards external factors than internal factors and also react negatively to academic failure. Pan (1993) shares that high achievers attribute their success more to effort, ability, intelligence and stable causes, while low achievers attribute their failure more to ability and the difficulty of the examination.

According to Glasser, 1975 (as cited in Pickhardt, 2011), failure can have tremendous effects on one's life; nonetheless, little attention has been given on how people experience multiple academic failures, since previous researches in academic failure have been primarily about its causal attributions (Le Foll & Rasclé, 2006; Lee, 2007; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Miller, 1998 as cited in Ojo & Owoyele, 2011). Studying a phenomenon may promote ways on how to deal with people who have failed in academics many times since they would have a better understanding of it. It is also beneficial in learning contexts since most educators are striving to have a better understanding of how to encourage the students to have more positive self-attitude after experiencing academic failure (Fransica & Conboy, 2006; Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005). They strike a note and stress that it is important to diagnose the causes of failure and work towards rectifying it. In a study by Chawla (2012), the findings indicated that family environment positively correlated with the academic achievement of the students.

Purpose of the study

The idea of this research stemmed from personal experience of one of the researchers when he observed a lack of interest in the attitude of a student towards her studies. She was the researcher's student while doing her intermediate in pre-engineering. At that time, the student's proficiency and approach towards education was remarkable and her aim was to be part of NEU University. After her failure to get admission, she chose to do her BS in Actuarial Sciences, but she became passive and demotivated and had very little interest towards maintaining her previously held academic standards. When asked about her disinterest in her studies, she revealed that the current situation was the result of experiences of rejection from NEU and its impact on her personal and educational career. This prompted the researcher to conduct a formal research on the issue. The study will help answer the following research questions:

1. What are the personal experiences of the students who fail to get admission in NEU?
2. What are the academic experiences of the students who fail to get admission in NEU?
3. What were the coping strategies used by the students to overcome the dilemma of rejection?

Methodology

The phenomenological study suits the objectives of the researcher to understand the live world experiences of the students who have been living with the dream of becoming an engineer and at the end of all their efforts they fail to accomplish them. It provides

the behavioral insight and change in student during that experience. Mcevoy and Welker (2000) state that emotional/behavioral disturbance (EBD) is characterized by a range of behaviors that adversely affect a child's academic performance and cannot be explained by other sensory or health impairments.

This research has been conducted following the phenomenological research method in the domain of qualitative research. The purpose of the research was to find out the experiences of the students who fail to get admission in engineering at NEU University. Initially 20 students from the University of Karachi, Actuarial Sciences Department who had applied at NEU were called by the researcher, who was teaching in the same department as a cooperative lecturer in English. After brief informal discussions, five students were selected for the detailed in-depth interviews. The objectives of the research were shared with the students and after taking their consent, the interviews were scheduled in the Statistics Department Library. Permission was sought from the Dean of the department to use the library building for the interviews. The interviews included open ended directional questions, which helped the participants to share their experiences with freedom. The data were collected through sixty minutes interviews each.

Participants

Initially, 20 students were selected for informal discussions and after careful consideration, five students of BS from the department of Actuarial Sciences, were selected for data collection. Out of these five participants, three students were female and the

two were male and all students were between the ages of 17 to 19 years. The interviewees went through detailed in-depth interviews of approximately 60 minutes each. The participants selected for this study were appropriate for this research as they had just gone through the phase of rejection from NEU and they were able to express and explain their experiences vividly.

Data collection method

The data were collected in this study following the phenomenological research method and was guided by the research questions using the three step process as shown in Figure 1. The interviews were recorded using mobile phone recorder to collect the responses of the aforementioned research questions. The phenomenological research method was adopted to form open ended and semi-structured questions which helped to explore the experiences of the participants. The initial interviews were more informal aiming at getting closer to the participants and establishing trust. It proved quite helpful to the researcher as all the participants were his students and there existed proximity between them. The objectives of the study were explained in detail before conducting the interviews and they were excited and willing to participate in the study. The students were given a consent letter after verbal permission had been taken from them.

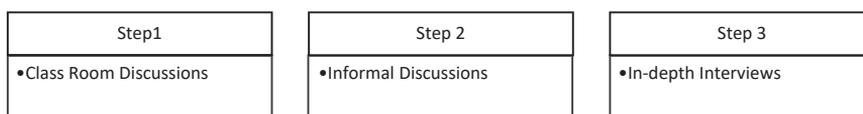


Figure 1: Process of data collection

Interviews

The researcher then proceeded to explore the feelings of the participants while they were doing their intermediate and how they planned to get admission at NEU. They were asked to share the expectations of the family, relatives and friends and the period of preparation for the final examination and entrance test and their ultimate hopes on the basis of the results of intermediate Part 1. They were further asked to share how they got the news of rejection and the lived experiences at the time of receiving the news. What they were thinking and what immediate plans came to their mind for the future. What responses they were expecting from the people around them. How they went through the transitional phase when they decided to opt for a different profession at the time of rejection. These queries helped the researcher to find out the responses he wanted to explore through the research questions.

Data analysis procedure

The data analysis procedure involved typological data analysis strategy in phenomenological research (Hatch, 2002). This strategy helped to organize the data to form judgments. The whole process facilitated the researcher to identify important themes and categories from the data. The initial interviews constituted the following typologies which were reflected in the data sets of the participants.

1. The participants belonged to middle and lower middle class strata and such families have high expectations from their children. This created a spirit of competition among all

participants and they were in high spirits when applying for NEU.

2. The study participants were required to grow through their formative years with only one goal, which was to become engineers. This helped them to establish a strong emotional affiliation with their academic goals.

Findings

The data showed a consistency in responses collected through interviews and the participants shared similar kind of emotions and experiences when they were rejected by NED. Four themes were identified from the data:

1. Future aspirations
2. Phase of preparation
3. Experience of being rejected
4. Transitional phase

Future aspirations

All the participants had future aspirations while they were in their intermediate and were later preparing for the entrance test until rejection from NEU hit them. Different elements were involved in the aspirations, which developed an emotional bond along with the aim of getting admission in NEU. These aspirations came from their families, teachers, friends and relatives which helped to build their personal interest as well. The future aspirations were reflected by all the participants and they described how emotional bond emerged

towards their studies. Saima described the source of aspiration when she used to be encouragement she received from family, friends, teachers and relatives.

Ayesha shared almost the same experiences when she was doing her intermediate:

“My teacher had given me a name in the class and she used to call me ‘Miss Engineer’, and I always believed that I was an engineer. Whenever my relatives visited me and especially my aunt, she used to ask me what I was studying and she always had this opinion that engineering was very difficult for girls, but my mother was confident that I would become an engineer and I would get admission in NEU as that was the only public sector university and my family was not in a position to afford a private university for my professional pursuits. So the hopes started from my admission in intermediate.”

Awais shared his experiences of aspiration:

“I always felt that a person, who accepts challenges, will succeed in life. When I was in matric I was good at sports and my friends always defeated me in sports they used to taunt me that I could only defeat them in sports and in education I was always behind them. I decided in matric to prove my strength in education too and I scored 72 % percent. Then I aimed at scoring even higher marks in intermediate to confirm

my admission at NED, I worked day and night and I was able to manage 77.5 % in intermediate. This boosted my expectations and I was very sure that I would be admitted in NEU; however, my aspirations fell flat when I didn't find my name in the merit list."

Kiran described that her aim was to become a doctor when she was studying in class six, but her parents wanted her to become an engineer following her elder sister who was also doing her engineering from NEU:

"I wanted to become a doctor, but everyone in the family was of the opinion that I should follow my elder sister's footsteps and I should also seek admission in NED, but it was unfortunate that my name didn't appear in the merit list."

Waqas shared that the most important aim in his life was to become an engineer and his interest since childhood was to invent something revolutionary in electronics. He stated:

"I always had aimed at inventing something extraordinary as my passions towards electronics. My parents supported me to perform experiments and I used to do all electronics work of my house. My friends used to call me 'Marconi' because of my attitude towards engineering and science."

The data arose that all participants were inspired and inclined towards NEU and their aspiration had five major sources: family,

self, relatives, friends and teachers (see Figure 2).

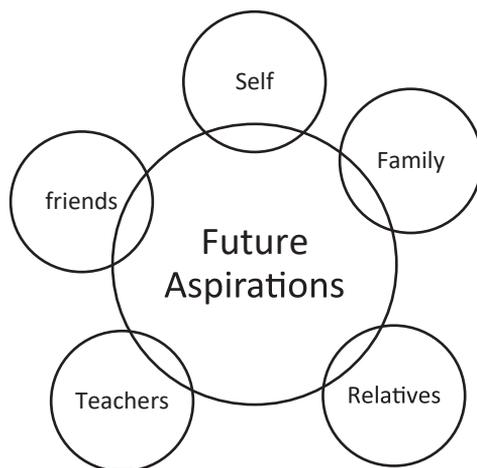


Figure 2: The variables of family, self, relatives, friends and teachers on aspiration

Phase of preparation

The phase of preparation was very exciting and it had with it hopes and fears of students. All the participants were working day and night to achieve their goals. They sacrificed their enjoyment and the focus was to achieve high grades to confirm their admission in NEU. They all were motivated by their family and the teachers to do their best to succeed. Kiran expressed:

“Throughout the two years of intermediate I had only one thing in my mind and that was to score 80 % marks. Almost all the teachers insisted on the same thing time and again that if you get less than 80 % marks, forget NEU and that is why all the focus in these two years was scoring 80 % marks.”

Waqas described the phase of preparation as the hardest time of his life:

“All the teachers used to remind us that if we wouldn’t get admission in NEU it would become very difficult to make our career bright. Almost every day my parents and especially my father used to ask me how I was preparing for the exams and since my percentage in first year was 79, my father was very much concerned considering my admission at NEU. I put all my effort in the next year to bring my percentage above 80 % and to pass the entrance test to get into NEU. I stopped watching cricket and gave up hangouts with my friends and I used to motivate myself by saying if I get into NEU, I will get enough time to enjoy my life.”

Saima narrated that she had pictured herself as an engineer and her interest towards study was at its highest peak and she shared:

“My two years of intermediate were different to what my whole educational career had been. I was very studious and my parents never told me to study as I was always surrounded by books.”

Aysha had a challenge to come up with the expectations of the teachers and family and she spent two years while doing intermediate with only goal-to get admission in NEU. She narrated:

“As everyone in the family considered me to be the best student amongst all cousins and siblings, their expectations were high. The teachers in college and coaching centre also regarded me as the best student that they had ever come across. Though it was difficult and nerve breaking to prove my worth all along, I studied day in and day out to accept the challenges that all of them were throwing at me.”

Kiran share that her sister was always there to support and guide her in her studies and expressed:

“My sister used to guide me for the entrance test and told me what usually comes in the entrance test and my preparation was according to her instructions. When she used to tell me of the good things and values of studying at NEU, my efforts towards studies used to increase a lot.”

It seemed through the above statements that the phase of preparation was challenging, but all participants were ready and did their best in accepting the challenges that they faced. These statements also reveal that the participants were not giving any time to other activities and they were trying to prove to their family members, teachers and themselves that they can succeed in achieving the aims that they had set for themselves.

Experiences of being rejected

The efforts and aspirations lead students to appear in the

entrance test and then the day came when the final merit list was displayed at NEU. All the participants had positive hopes of getting admissions and they believed their hard work will earn for them what they had been seeking for, but unfortunately they had to face rejection. All the participants had almost a common feeling and they felt that the aim of their life had disappeared for good. They were morally and mentally dejected. All hope, excitement, purpose of living had vanished. Saima said:

“I was excited and at the same time had fears, but was confident that my name will appear in the list.”

This excitement was felt by all participants, but when they found their name missing from the list they felt their dreams had shattered. Waqas said:

“I was lifeless and dead when I could not find my name on the list. I went through the list 100 times in 2 minutes- I had always felt that I could do best in engineering and being from a lower middle class family, the only hope of becoming an engineer was to get admission in NEU. I put in my efforts and I scored a very high percentage, yet I was unjustly denied admission. I went in a state of depression and didn't want to see anyone-I had lost hope of living and was confined to my room for days. I started hating everyone and my anger was reflected in my silence. Initially, everyone supported me in my difficult phase, but I wasn't interested in what they were saying as my life was aimless. My parents,

especially my sister encouraged me to do something else and do my masters in Physics, but I had started hating engineering and science discipline. It took me more than a month to get back to my almost routine tasks.”

To Awais it was a great set back in his confidence:

“It was for the very first time in my life that I faced failure and helplessness, there was nothing in my hands and I was forced to face the music. I felt it would end my professional career, I was already not feeling good to make my future in sports and all hopes disappeared. I was not willing to tell anyone of the situation and when my father asked me about the result, I was numb found, mute and burst out crying. Although my brother consoled me, my father was not happy at all and this increased my agony.”

Saima verbalized:

“I was silent-a statue when I didn’t see my name on the list. This was the end of my life-almost doomsday. I didn’t want to see anyone and started hating myself.”

Aysha stated:

“I was very angry and I was just cursing Pakistan’s education system. I had no more interest in education and I was thinking to quit my studies.”

Kiran described:

“My mind was blank and I did not believe this could happen to me. I believed that it was not merit but bribe and other illegal means which granted admissions to unworthy students...I was not interested to study any more-in any discipline. It was the end of my existence.”

The above statements show that the rejection affected the students badly and their interest towards education decreased significantly. Moreover, it insinuated negativity in their thoughts, which was reflected through Kiran’s statement that she had lost trust in the educational system and started believing that there was no place for hard work and merit, rather there were negative means in the system which unjustly granted admissions to undeserving students.

Transition phase

It took a month or so for the participants to come out of the dilemma and agony period. As time passed, they started thinking to complete their education to fulfill their social needs. Their friends, teachers and family advised and guided them to pursue some other profession. Although, this transitional phase helped them to think over their future and career again, the passion towards education was missing. After getting admission in other fields, they found themselves in a predicament and they were not sure what the future actually held for them. Waqas stated:

“I applied at KU on the advice of my teacher and I am doing my BS, but I have no interest in the subject and I am doing it to get some job in the future”.

Saima said:

“I had never ever heard of Actuarial Sciences before, but one of my teachers advised me to go for this field. I has followed her advice, but I am confused what the degree will give me after four years of completion.”

Kiran felt:

“I don't know what the future of my study is. I am doing it as one of my friends also took admission here, but I still feel depressed and sad when I remember NEU and I curse the educational system of Pakistan.”

Awais verbalized:

“I feel I am doing injustice to myself and the system is responsible for it. I am doing it for no use and I don't find any interest towards education- I only need a degree to get a job.”

Ayesha described:

“I heard this is also a good degree, although I don't

know all the details of it yet. I think this will also help me.... I don't think I have the same interest towards studies, but somehow I am managing to do it. Do I have a choice?"

Through these statements it emerges that it was very difficult for the students to adjust in their new imposed and forced situation. They were doing their BS to complete their education by following the advice of the people around them and the aim was to secure a job at the end of the studies. The attitude towards studies as discussed earlier was completely different to what it was during the phase of preparation. The participants seemed demoralized and had very little hope in their future career.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to look into the lives of the students who had fallen victim to the educational system, which disallows thousands of those who can become better professionals in the fields of their own choice, but unfortunately they are lugged to join the professions they have no interest in. It subsequently hampers the performance of the whole country as there are people who are working to earn their living in particular fields without having any personal interest. This study was designed to give a voice to such individuals and to provide an intensely personal perspective of the educational enigma.

It seemed through the interviews that the refutation from NEU University had a very negative impact on the personalities of the participants as Baldwin and Levin (1958) concur with the findings

of the present study that there is a vital impact of success and failure on students' educational and professional life. Their passion and aim towards education vanishes and their interest towards becoming a strong professional diminishes as failure reduces the interest of students towards education (Brunstein Gollwitzer, 1996).

All participants in this research expressed the importance of obtaining a professional degree of their own choice to become effective professionals and they demonstrated their regrets for not getting admission in the program of their own choice. The after effects have involved incarceration at one extreme and an inability to locate gainful and meaningful employment at the other. Students after failing, felt incomplete in their education and present and future life. This state can be understood through self-completion theory, according to which incompleteness is an aversive self-evaluative state that occurs as people realize that they are falling short of the required traits (Gollwitzer, 1987; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). All participants belonged to middle and lower middle class families and the male participants would be the future bread earners of the family, these results are aligned with the results of Nauman (2015). Each of them expressed a desire for a better future for themselves and their families and this was only possible if they had obtained the anticipated professional degrees. In each case, the road to an alternative professional degree was long, fatigued and punctuated with challenges.

The most disquieting sentiment these students shared were lack of concentration towards the studies which they were engaged in and they lacked satisfaction towards learning. As stated by Brunstein and Gollwitzer (1996), the students' attention and focus

towards studies goes through drastic changes depending on their interest in the subject. This situation is alarming because these were amongst the best students, full of enthusiasm while they were doing their intermediate, but their talents were being wasted. The feeling had emerged in them that they had been left behind and disconnected from their desired educational process.

The experience of not getting into the profession of their own choice confused them and initiated in developing a negative attitude towards the country's educational system. They felt it very hard for the lower economic class in Pakistan to upgrade their status as the government provided very little assistance to the students by not establishing the required number of public sector universities. The scarcity of public sector universities results in loss of talent, as there is no alternatives available. In the unobtrusive observations during the interviews and class room informal discussions, the close proximity of the students to the profession of their own choice was demonstrative of the connection each participant sought and when it was not achieved, they had developed opposite emotions. The students, who develop their aspirations throughout their academic life towards a particular profession, if not achieved, hurt them badly. Unintentionally, the society contributes in shaping the mind of the students towards their future and when the target is not achieved, then their personality and confidence shakes and their interest towards their future decreases. Arshan, Atteberry and Kurlaender (2008) agree that there is a little impact on students' professional and future education when failing in some exams, but in this case the fear of failing and increasing doubts in themselves and in the society disallow them to come out of the impact of the failure that they had faced. On the other hand, the findings of Suls (2001) endorse the

findings of this study that failure and its negative effects can create detrimental thinking and attitudes to face different situations in the society.

This research indicates that a small number of public sector universities bequeath with very little opportunities for the middle and lower middle class students to achieve professional degrees of their own choice and thus damages the talent of the country. By establishing new universities, it will cater to the needs of many students who are left behind by a very small margin and negative factors would be minimized and students could also be assisted and supported to approach university studies in a way that will increase their chances of success and interest (Fraser & Killen 2003). Therefore, much needs to be done in order to bring these hardworking and talented students into the mainstream society, where their talents can be utilized to the maximum.

Conclusion and recommendations

The research gives a voice to the students who have personally gone through the experiences of rejection and the findings help in estimating the needs to fill in this crevasse because a key goal of education is to assure the success of all students. A progressive country cannot afford to ignore the needs and interests of talented students. Promoting education and giving more opportunities to our students will help the nation to progress and will infuse patriotism and a strong belief will be developed that in Pakistan hard work will not go in vain and the aims can be achieved through continuous efforts by providing equal opportunities for the deserving students. The results of this phenomenological study provide a personalized

perspective of the research that will lead to the attainment of pre conceived professional goals in life. Even if the students opt for alternative studies, they will be unable to develop the same approach and interest towards the studies as they had throughout the phase of preparation.

The research indicates a dire need to open new public sector universities in Pakistan and especially in a cosmopolitan city of Karachi where the population has reached twenty million. The research also highlights the hidden frustrations of the youth and how dejected and lethargic attitude towards studies can take the country's progression in reverse gear.

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