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## **Dwelling into the Role of Ahamkara in Academic Performance: A Qualitative Inquiry**

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Date of publication: June 6<sup>th</sup> 2023

Edition period: April 2023 – June 2023

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To cite this article: Tayal, N., & Sharma, N. (2023). Dwelling into the Role of Ahamkara in Academic Performance: A Qualitative Inquiry. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 12(2), 83-115. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.10269>

**To link this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.10269>

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# Dwelling into the Role of Ahamkara in Academic Performance: A Qualitative Inquiry

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## Abstract

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A student's academic performance is conditioned on factors within the pupil or outside, in the environment. The Western body of knowledge emphasizes the positive role of "Self" and related variables such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and others on the academic performance of students. An Indian counterpart to the concept of self is "Aham". The present study aimed at qualitatively understanding the role of Ahamkara in the academic performance of school students. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview technique was utilised for data collection. A total of 11 interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic Network analysis framework forwarded by Attride-Sterling (2001) was utilized for data analysis. Based on the analysis 4 global themes emerged. They are: Formation and maintenance of a sense of self through Identification; Active engagement of Self in the learning process leads to growth; Ignorance of Self, a path to failure; and Failure an opportunity to maintain the optimal sense of self.

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**Keywords:** sense of self, academic performance, students, qualitative inquiry, thematic network analysis

# Profundizando en el Papel de Ahamkara en el Rendimiento Académico: Una Investigación Cualitativa

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## Resumen

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El rendimiento académico de un alumno está condicionado por factores internos del alumno o externos, del entorno. El conjunto de conocimientos occidentales hace hincapié en el papel positivo del "Yo" y las variables relacionadas, como la autoestima, la autoeficacia, la confianza en uno mismo y otras, en el rendimiento académico de los alumnos. Un equivalente indio del concepto de "yo" es "Aham". El presente estudio tenía como objetivo comprender cualitativamente el papel de Ahamkara en el rendimiento académico de los estudiantes escolares. Para ello, se utilizó una técnica de entrevista semiestructurada para la recogida de datos. Se grabaron y transcribieron un total de 11 entrevistas. Para el análisis de los datos se utilizó el marco de análisis temático en red propuesto por Attride-Sterling (2001). A partir del análisis surgieron 4 temas globales. Éstos son Formación y mantenimiento del sentido del yo a través de la identificación; El compromiso activo del yo en el proceso de aprendizaje conduce al crecimiento; La ignorancia del yo, un camino hacia el fracaso; y El fracaso, una oportunidad para mantener el sentido óptimo del yo.

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**Palabras clave:** sentido del yo, rendimiento académico, estudiantes, investigación cualitativa, análisis de redes temáticas

Students have immense potential to form and develop a new pattern of behavior during their life course depending on context (Baharuddin & Makin, 2004). The learning process is instrumental in shaping students' mindsets, lifestyles, and personalities. Education in school is inclusive of their mental, physical, social, and also emotional development by inculcating the values and skills to differentiate between good and bad and execute the needful actions at the right time. School exposes students to dynamic knowledge which exerts influence on their adulthood in terms of decision making, problem-solving, interpersonal relationships, work ethics, and other aspects of adult life. Thus, educational success determines the successful development of the youth and their smooth transition into adulthood. An essential component of educational success is the academic performance of a student. Academic performance is elucidated as an observable and measurable behavior of a student within a stipulated period of time. It comprises of students' attained scores in any form of assessment e.g. class test, classroom exercise, or end-of-semester examination (Yusuf et al., 2016). Hereby, the academic performance of the students becomes an integral part of their overall educational success as it reflects a students' progress on the structured and continuous assessment related to their defined syllabus. Hence, academic performance determines the success of an individual, educational institution, and the nation at large.

Indian education system divides the total twelve years of education into four segments i.e., Primary education, middle education, Secondary education, and senior secondary education. The senior secondary level is a pivotal phase in the life of students due to its immense effect on their procurement of seats in higher education, career and job opportunity, and active contribution to national development (Kimani et al., 2013). Students with high academic performance have numerous positive impacts, whereas the poor academic performance of students could have unfortunate consequences.

Consequently, researchers and practitioners in the field of education and psychology have attempted to discover the factors that wield influence on the academic performance of students. The literature revolves around four categories of variables that are either internal or external to an individual such as school, home, and teachers related factors, or student characteristics (Baidoo-Anu, 2018; Daniel et al., 2020; Diaz, 2003). The school related

factors that may significantly affect the academic performance of the students include: parent-school interaction (Abewa & Edemealem, 2019); building typology/ environment (Okafor et al., 2016); classroom equipments (Mogaka, 2019); physical facilities, as well as teaching and learning resources (Mushtaq & Khan, 2012). Similarly factors at home may also significantly affect child's academic performance such as parental education (Srinivas & Venkatkrishnan, 2016) and family income (Raychauduri et al., 2010). The lack of cognitive stimulation and support has been found detrimental in the reading, verbal and mathematical skills amongst poor children (Korenman et al., 2005). Furthermore, teachers are the interface of the transmission of knowledge, skills and values in the learning process. Teacher related factors that influence academic performance are: teachers influence (Srinivas & Venkatkrishnan, 2016); student's attendance, teacher-student ratio, qualification of teacher and distance from schools (Raychauduri et al., 2010), teacher's workload (Rose & Sika, 2019), and teacher's commitment to duty (Malambo, 2012). Finally, the most essential category of factors influencing academic performance is student's characteristics such as academic self-concept (Hoge et al., 2012); and academic motivation, self-efficacy, student's engagement (Dogan, 2017). In recent times, the focus of research has shifted from external factors to internal factors, wherein the self-related variables such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-confidence, self- concept, and others have dominated the research on academic performance.

Students' characteristics are mostly centered on the self and identity. An Indian counterpart to the concept of "self" is "Aham". Aham is the generic term, meaning "Self". In Indian Psychology, there are various terms dedicated to the concept of self-other than Aham such as Jiva, Bhokta, Dehi, Karta, Ahambhava, *Ahamkara*, and many more. Herein, *Ahamkara* refers to the ability of the mind to make things and experiences as "me" or "mine". Rama et al. (1976) illustrated the role of *Ahamkara* with an example where "Rose is seen" converts to "I see a rose". Therefore, in psychological terms, *Ahamkara* is understood as the mechanism of mind that determines the relationship of an individual with oneself, their work, the people, and the world around them. Salagame et al (2005) state that the scope of *Ahamkara* is wide enough to incorporate western concepts like self-efficacy, self-esteem, individuality, relational self, locus of control, etc. The major differences between the two approaches, i.e., Eastern and western are a) In

the western concept of ego, only the awakened state experiences are considered as reality whereas in the eastern context all human experiences including altered states of consciousness or paranormal are considered reality; b) In the western concept, self has limited dimensions such as bio-psycho-social identity whereas in eastern context the self also includes the transcendental self; c) In regard with the functional value of self, western self is objective, measurable and observable whereas the eastern understanding promotes the idea of subjective self; and lastly, The methodology or approach suggested to study the self is also different in both the approaches. Western knowledge mostly utilizes the Etic approach or a third person observation whereas the eastern knowledge supports both etic and emic approaches, especially the first person experiences (Salagame et al., 2005, Tayal & Sharma, 2020). On the basis of the review, it can be established that *Ahamkara*, as a construct, has essence and substance in the Indian context. Furthermore, Salagame (2006) described *Ahamkara* as a meta-construct that holds the potential to embrace many concepts related to self and identity in modern psychology.

Raj (1993) performed theoretical analysis on classical Indian texts like Upanishads and Vedanta. Additionally, they interviewed sages and yogis in an attempt to explore the concept of *Ahamkara* from an Indian perspective. The result leads to the development of a componential model of *Ahamkara*-stating that *Ahamkara* has four major components i.e., Individuality (sense of uniqueness), Separation (differentiation between I and I- not), Agency (sense of doer-ship), and Identification (Bio-psycho-social-transcendental identity).

### **Review of Literature**

Literature is indicative of mixed results on the role of sense of self in academic performance. Studies have shown that a low sense of self and even a high sense of self exert a negative influence on the academic performance of students. Flury and Ickes (2007) suggested that Individuals with a weak sense of self are characterized by feelings such as “they do not know who they are, what they think, what their own opinions are and what they want to do”. Furthermore, literature (Kacel et al., 2017) also highlights the

association between overly inflated sense of self and personality disorders such as Narcissism, Grandiosity, psychopathy. It also leads to significant psychological distress, functional impairment, and interpersonal conflicts.

### **Identification and Academic Performance**

Identification has been established as one of the components of *Ahamkara*, which plays vital role in academic performance. Identification is related to one's bio-psycho-social identity, associations and attachments that is linked to the feelings associated with "I and mine". Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage, in which the individuals identify their strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, and competencies (Erikson 1968; Roazen, 1976). The process of identity formation occurs when an individual start to build up a sense of self. Indian and western traditions differ in terms of Identity formation. The western tradition perceives it as an individual process, however Indian tradition views it as group identity process.

### **Identity Formation in the School Setting**

Hawkins (2005) defines identity formation as, "an ongoing negotiation between the individual and the social context or environment, with particular attention paid to operant cultural and power relations". Erikson (1959) has illustrated the role of schooling in identity formation. School provides an opportunity to do various task. At times, if students fail to compete the challenges, it may create role conflict that might be detrimental to their sense of competence, goal orientation, and dedication. Professionals can facilitate students to meet out the challenges by developing adaptive coping skills. A study revealed that students a sense of connection to their peers, schools, and teachers is related to high self-esteem, better academic involvement, and lower risky behaviors (Libbey, 2004).

## **Environmental Factors: Society, Family, and School**

Marcia (1966) has suggested that physiological and environmental variables such as age, gender, and socio-cultural context determine the process of identity development. Studies suggest that the children develop committed identities both in authoritative and authoritarian familiar settings (Berzonsky, 2004). Parents are regarded as role models to their children, who permit moderate autonomy, provide emotional support, and encourage independence and added responsibility to their children (Marjoribanks, 1996). It has been found that if parents aspire for the education of their children, their educational goals are increased threefold (Marjoribanks, 1996).

## **Career Identity and Well-Being**

Erikson (1980) opined that occupational identity is instrumental for the well-being of individuals. Research disclosed a positive association of vocational identity with life satisfaction, it can be envisaged that increment in grade point average (GPA) can be obtained by reducing the level of anxiety (Healy, 1991). This study also exhibited that anxiety causes disruptions in decision-making, which resulted in low grades on tests, and consequently decreased GPA.

## **Separation and Academic Performance**

Separation characterizes by the feeling between “I and not -I”, based on the differentiation between “self” and “others”. The separation component of the *Ahamkara* appears similar to the western concept of identity distinctiveness. As individuals perceive themselves unique and distinct from others at very early age in their first year of life, however this distinction becomes more elaborated during adolescence (Harter, 2012). It becomes a crucial task to achieve a sense of distinctiveness. Poor separation- individuation is associated with low college adjustment (Mattanah et al., 2004), and disrupted identity development (Koepke & Denissen, 2012).



## **Individuality and Academic Performance**

Individuality characterized by a sense of uniqueness with regard to acquiring unique traits and abilities. The target of the individuation is to embellish a self that is separate and autonomous. The object relations theory elucidates that adolescents achieve the process of individuation through constructing a variety of personal fables, comprising subjective invulnerability, omnipotence, and personal uniqueness (Lapsley, 1993).

Self-esteem can be understood as an individual's positive or negative evaluations of their own selves (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem play instrumental role in enhancing academic achievement (Redenbach, 1991). Lane et al. (2004) found significant relationship between self-esteem and self-efficacy. Further, performance accomplishments and academic performance was mediated by self-efficacy.

## **Agency and Academic Performance**

In the Indian classical texts, agency is understood in terms of "I"-feeling as an agent of action. It embraces the sense of doer-ship, a sense of control, as well the personal efficacy. The self as an agent has capacity to mediate in the knowledge structure considering personal goals, intentions, and choices (McCombs, 2001). The agency escalates the responsibility towards their future (Arnett, 2000).

## **Educational Attainment and Locus of Control**

Rotter (1966) suggests that locus of control is associated with psychological adjustment and academic achievement. Study revealed that students who attribute their scores due to their own abilities and efforts tended to feel satisfied, and competent, whereas students attributing their failures on others felt more hostile, angry, and alarmed (Weiner et al., 1979).

Despite mixed literature, researchers have also emphasized the essentiality of concepts such as constructive self-regard, healthy self-esteem, flourishing self-concept, bi-local focus, balanced personality, and other related concepts that emphasize maintaining a balanced state of sense of self

which is neither too weak nor too strong or rigid. Furthermore, Tayal and Sharma (2022) used a quantitative approach to study the relationship between *Ahamkara* and the academic performance of school students. They reported that *Ahamkara* and academic performance share a curvilinear relationship. The study ascertains that there exists an inverted- U relationship between *Ahamkara* and academic performance i.e., in order to attain optimal academic performance an individual requires a balanced sense of self. Extreme either too high or too low of *Ahamkara* can negatively affect the academic performance of students. Furthermore, classical text highlights the importance of cultivating balanced *Ahamkara*. Indian scriptures affirm that disciplined *Ahamkara* can lead to accurate perception, reasonable personality, rational decision making, and thus greater efforts to goal attainment reflected in the statement “I can do it and so I will do it” (Raguram, 2007). Hence, the present study aimed at understanding the role of *Ahamkara* in the academic performance of school students. Accordingly, the main and sub research objectives for this study are:

1. To explore the *Ahamkara* amongst senior secondary school students.
  - i. To explore the formation and underlining expressions of *Ahamkara* amongst adolescents.
  - ii. To assess the functioning of various components of *Ahamkara* through the lived experiences of student.
2. To examine the sense of connection between *Ahamkara* and academic performance.

### **Methodology**

The research work had an intrinsic realist paradigm, wherein the objectivity was obtained thorough planning and careful execution of the research process, interview skills, reflexivity, memo writing, thick description, line by line coding, and unbiased reporting.

## **Participants**

The study followed a theoretical sampling wherein the sample for the research comprised 11 senior secondary students from class 12th of public schools located in various districts of Haryana, India. For the purpose of Variability, students attaining high as well as low scores were selected. The resultant sample was inclusive of seven females and four males. On the basis of scores, six participants were high scorers and five in the low scorer's category. All the chosen participants were briefed about the purpose and procedure of the study. Before beginning with the interviews, written informed consent was obtained from the participants. The data collection continued till the saturation point was achieved.

## **Method of data collection**

A semi-structured interview technique was utilised for the purpose of data collection. The interview schedule was prepared after a thorough understanding of the concept of *Ahamkara*. The schedule utilized the componential model proposed by Raj (1993), where the four components of *Ahamkara* i.e., Identification, Individuality, Separation, and Agency were emphasized. The semi-structured interview consisted of approximately 24 questions across 4 dimensions. The schedule was flexible as per the participant's description of their experiences and related thoughts and feelings. Each interview ranged between 35-45 minutes.

## **Procedure**

For the purpose of qualitative research, students studying in class 12th of public schools were approached based on the variety of marks attained by them. The participant's scores ranged from 55-95 percent. Participants who gave written informed consent were chosen for an interview. The time and place of the interview were mutually decided as per the convenience of the interviewee and interviewer. Participants were gently reminded of the interview one day prior to the decided date. The interview began with some general questions which act as ice breakers between the interviewee and interviewer. Slowly the questions got specifying catering to the different

components of *Ahamkara*. All the interviews were recorded and interviewees were thanked for their valuable contribution. Later, the interviews were transcribed and thematic network analysis (TNA) was utilized in order to analyze the data.

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic network analysis (TNA) framework forwarded by Attride- Stirling (2001) was implemented for analyzing the transcripts of the interviews conducted. Attride- Sterling (2001) have proposed six systematic steps for analyzing qualitative data using thematic network analysis: a) Coding the material (Devising the coding framework, and dissecting the text into segments by employing the coding framework), b) Identifying themes (extracting abstract themes from the segmented text, and refining themes), c) Constructing thematic network (arranging themes, selecting basic themes, making organizing themes, deducing global themes, illustrating the relationship between basic, organizing and global themes through thematic networks, verification of network) d) describing and exploring the network e) Summarizing the thematic network, and f) interpreting the thematic network. Thematic networks are web like maps which are represented in terms of connections and association between Basic themes, Organizing themes and Global themes. With respect to the present data, Thematic network analysis resulted in 4 global themes; 9 organizing themes, and 56 basic themes in an attempt to structure and derive meaning of the qualitative data.

## **Results and Discussion**

Based on the thematic network analysis (TNA) four global themes; nine organizing themes and 56 basic themes were identified. The four global themes are: Formation and maintenance of a sense of self through Identification; Active engagement of Self in the learning process leads to

growth; Ignorance of Self, a path to failure; and Failure as an opportunity to maintain the optimal sense of self.

### **Global Theme 1: Formation and Maintenance of Sense of Self through Identification**

The Sense of Self is defined as an individual's perception and awareness of oneself. It is a dynamic concept which engulfs both the private self and social self. The internalized psychic system that consolidates an individual's internal self and the external social world into a congruent whole is called identity. Identification is an unconscious process by which an individual assimilates some features, quality, or aspects of the other into one's self. Identification could be with physical, psychological, or social aspects. These aspects help an individual to form an idea of "who they are and guide their behavior to maintain continuity in their sense of self. Therefore, it refers to the feeling of "me" and "mine" arising due to attachment with the "Bio-psycho-social-spiritual" identity such as body, mental abilities, social status, religion, etc. This further guides an individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions (Salgame, 2013). Based on the analysis it can be said that sense of self is formed and maintained through identification. The targeted population for the present research was school students who have limited exploration and understanding of their self, due to age, experience, and exposure.

Based on the analysis it was found that students form their sense of self in association to group memberships. Overall three types of categories of groups can be observed, based on the level of control. Firstly, perceived in-groups (Cognitive aspects) are memberships that are under complete control of an individual because such groups are abstract and do not exist in physical boundaries; individuals can conveniently enter or exit the group.

I am more of an introvert who prefers to take the corner seat and be alone in a party and now even my friends know this so they do not force me to be out there without making me feel weird. (Interviewee 5, 18 Yrs old, Girl)

Secondly, Hereditary social groups (social aspects) include groups which an individual does not have control over, groups that are not directly chosen

by the individual himself rather s/he is born into these groups such as family, community, or gender.

I am proud to be a part of the Jain community. I like the simplicity of their ideas. Jainism talks about that everything in life is planned and destined- who will cross your path, what will you eventually end up becoming –you know all of it. So especially in times of confusion and when I feel totally lost, it helps me to keep my calm and keep moving because it states that action is must. (Interviewee 3, 19 Yrs old, Girl)

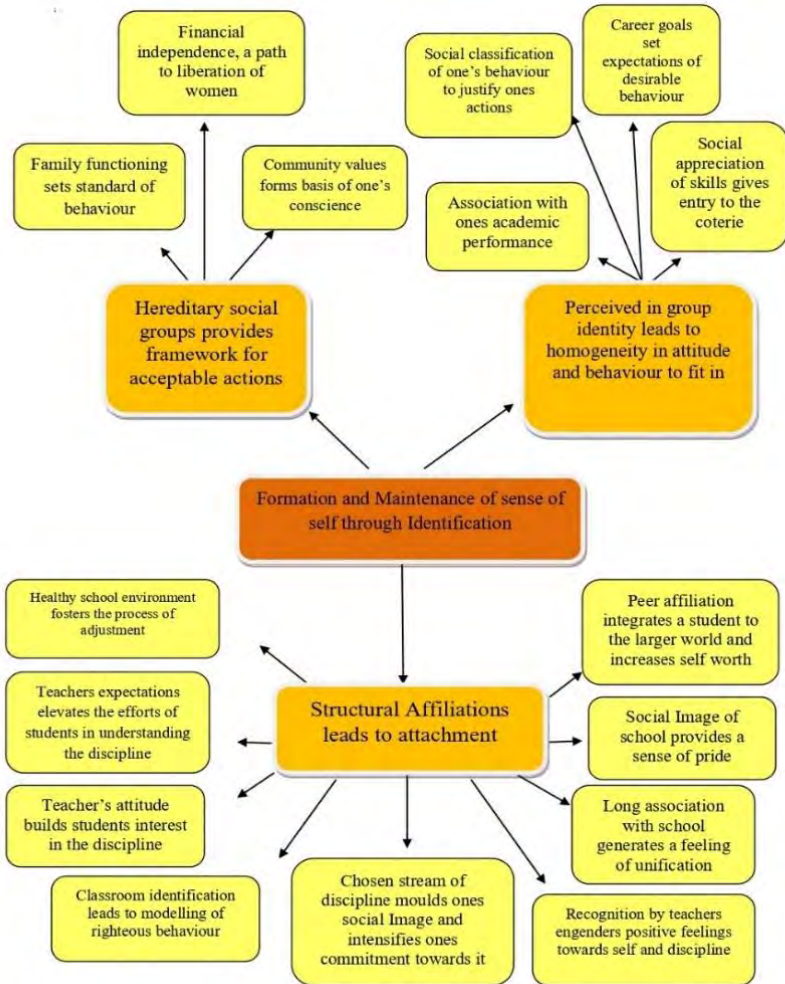
Lastly, structural association (physical aspects) includes memberships to groups where an individual may have partial control in regard to choosing to be a member but not on how it functions. Such groups have definite boundaries.

You must have heard about ABC school, it is the best school in town. It has 3 buildings for different classes and 2 huge playgrounds, the teachers are the experts in their own fields. It's a huge school so being a part of it is absolutely amazing. You know when I go through the streets in the uniform people look at me with respect and so it brings in responsibility to maintain the school image and have a proper conduct. (Interviewee 1, 18 Yrs old, Girl)

Thus, this global theme can be understood with three organizing themes. They are Structural Associations that lead to attachment; Hereditary Social groups provide a framework of appropriate actions and Perceived in-group identity leads to homogeneity in attitude and behavior. These are the sources of identification that build an individual's sense of self or *Ahamkara*, which further guides an individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions. These three categories cover 16 basic themes. Basic themes represent the object of an association like the school one studies in, the teachers who teachers the child, the subject/ discipline of choice, the peer affiliations, the community, the family functioning, the gender role, the career choices, association with one's own achievements, social appreciation and specific behaviors (see figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Thematic Network representing Global theme 1*



## **Global Themes 2: Active Engagement of “Self” in Learning Process Leads to Growth**

Student engagement refers to a meaningful engagement of pupils throughout the learning environment. Martin and Torres (2016) described it as “a relationship between the student and the school, teachers, peers, instruction and curriculum”. Student engagement is a multifaceted concept (Lee, 2014). It has three prominent dimensions that are behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Appleton, 2012; Phan et al., 2016; Seixas, Gomes, & Filho, 2016). Behavioral engagement explains students’ participation in academic and co-curricular activities whereas emotional engagement or affective/psychological engagement reflects students’ reactions either positive or negative in relation to their teachers, peers, and the school at large such as a sense of belonging (Finn, 1993; Willms, 2003). Lastly, cognitive engagement describes a student’s willingness and readiness to excel in a crucial skill set (Fredericks, et al., 2004).

Research affirms that pupils with higher engagement have high academic performance measured in terms of GPAs and test scores (Goodenow, 1993). In similar regard, Skinner et al. (2008, 2009) in the self-system model of motivational development reports dynamic relations amongst individuals’ experience of “context”, “self”, “engagement/disaffection”, and “outcomes”. Herein, the “self” is perceived as individuals’ self-appraisals of their own abilities and task/activity (e.g., control beliefs, task values) that arise through socialization in a defined context. The model outlines that these self-appraisals determine emotional and behavioral engagement or dis-affection. Accordingly, the second global theme highlights the importance of “Self” in determining the nature of engagement with ones’ work and its associated outcomes. This theme can be understood in regard to two organizing themes. They are, Behavior guided by self-knowledge results in satisfaction, and Integration of self and work leads to High cognitive and emotional involvement of learners. Herein, the former organizing theme emphasizes the importance of self-exploration, self-awareness, and self-understanding. The data reflects that students whose behavior is guided by self-knowledge, based on their liking-disliking, strength- weakness, result in satisfaction. In such cases, failures act as a source of motivation to improve and perform better next time. When the behavior is guided by self-knowledge it leads to



satisfaction. Such behavior is driven by interest, is self-regulated, goal setting precedes goal- directed behavior, goal setting is based on self-evaluation and task analysis, the decision is influenced by self-compassion, sense of doership and Internal satisfaction with ones work becomes more important than others judgment. This theme focuses on students that are self- aware. They may or may not have high academic performance as a goal. They may have creative tendencies such as sports, instrumental music, dance, and other artistic fields.

I am an average scorer and I am okay with that. I am more inclined towards music especially instrumental. I have learned to play guitar, drums, and also a little bit of Veena. Being in 12th I am required to prioritize my academics so I study with focus but I make sure to take out time for my music lessons also. Because I know that instrumental required daily practice and the more I practice, the better I will be. For me, the definition of being the best is when it comes from the inside. If I feel satisfied and confident about my piece I will pursue it regardless. But if I am not satisfied I work on it even harder. (Interviewee 7, 18 yrs, Girl)

The latter organizing theme i.e., Integration of self and work leads to High cognitive and emotional involvement of learners- underlines the essentiality of incorporating ones' work as a part of one's "self". When the integration of self and work happens, it enhances the learner's engagement with their work. Students get emotionally and cognitively more involvement with their work by taking responsibility and accountability for the outcomes and thus attaining the set academic goals.

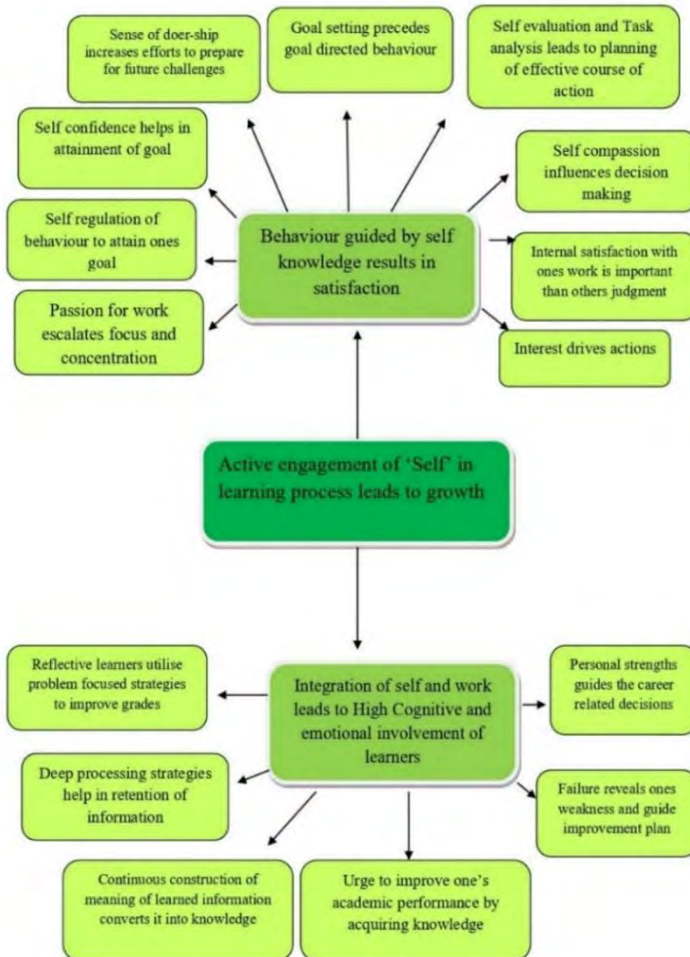
My work reflects my personality. Every answer I attempt I want to give my best. My idea is that it should have my touch; my style that makes my answer stand out from all the others. And that why I like to focus not only on rote learning rather have complete knowledge of the topic- how it begin, who discovered it, when, where, and everything I can even if it is not mentioned in the textbook I do my own surfing. (Interviewee 1, 18 yrs, Girl)

This emphasizes about the students who have self-knowledge and actively aim to fetch good academic records. This category of students is characterized by their problem-focused strategies of improving grades, continuous construction of knowledge, deep processing of information,

acquiring knowledge in order to improve, making career decisions based on individual strengths, and building improvement plans guided by failure experiences. Thus, the active role of self in the learning process is essential in order to grow in a positive direction (see figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Thematic Network representing Global theme 2*



### **Global theme 3: Ignorance of Self, a Path to Failure**

The experience of the self includes a consciousness of one's external physicality together with one's own internal dispositions and emotional life. In Indian classical texts, the self is understood in deeper terms where it is inclusive of one's spiritual and transcendental nature as well. In current living, when things are progressing at a great pace and humans do not have time to explore themselves, it generates a serious threat of a) lack of Self-knowledge; b) disrupted knowledge of self; and/or c) complete ignorance self. It is easy for individuals of all ages to accept the goals set by others for them than to set one's own goals. This is because goal setting requires meta-cognitive strategies like planning, analyzing, executing, which consume energy at multiple levels and forms. The timeline and goals set by society may be used as an indicator to track one's progress and growth but when they are accepted without modification as per oneself, it may become a source of stress, pressure, disappointment. Therefore, this theme of growth light on the importance of self-knowledge in an individual's life. Data analysis reveals that Students who have less opportunity for self-exploration in the early stages of development or have a low sense of self are unable to perform. They highly understood themselves in relation to the artificial or temporary identities such as materialistic associations and societal validation regardless of one's true identity.

This global theme can be understood in regard to two organizing themes. They are; Cognitive dissonance leads to low academic performance; and socially guided behavior, a source of dissatisfaction. This theme revolves around the category of students who have not explored their true selves. Their academic decisions are either based on superficial aspects of the work or are socially guided. When decisions are guided by low self-understanding it results in deterioration of academic performance. Herein, the importance of goal is unclear and the Work decisions are usually guided by superficial aspects of work like availability of subject, difficulty level, of the subject, the social image of discipline, the scope of success. When encountering obstacles, the students usually resort to peripheral routes of problem-solving and external causes to failure are used as an excuse to not work hard.

I do not know what I want to do after my school. But I choose commerce in 12th because you know arts are mostly for low scorers. Although I am not

good with mathematics at least choosing commerce would save me from all the questions of relatives and aunties. Plus subjects like business management are mostly theoretically so I can cram it up in exams. (Interviewee 8, 18 Yrs old, Boy)

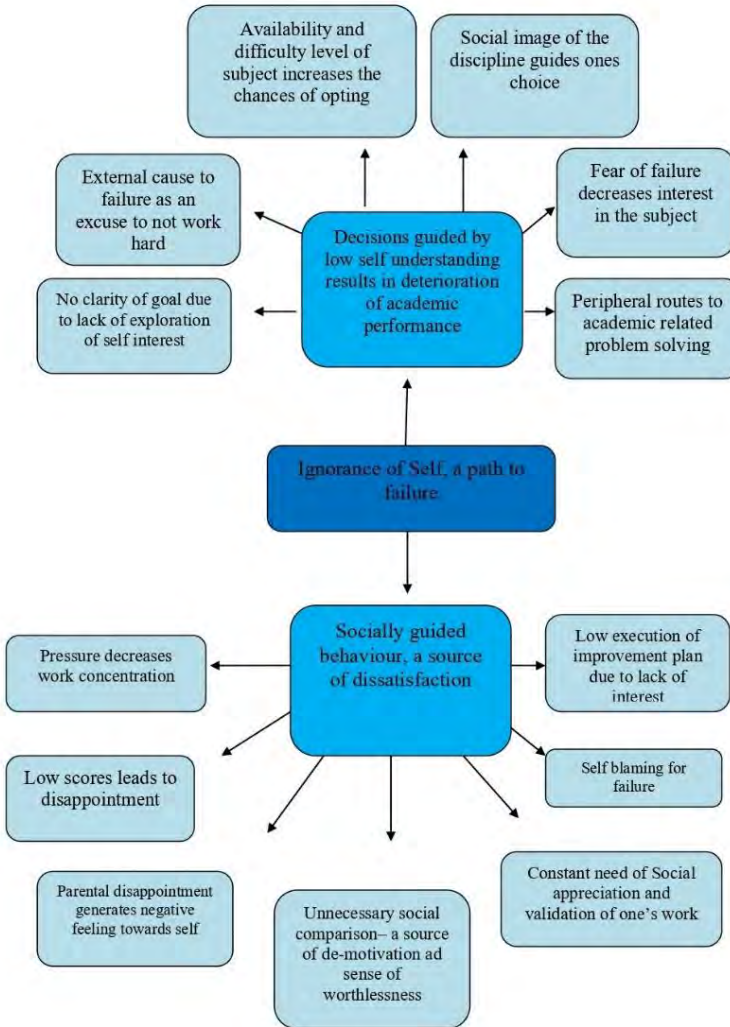
The second category of students includes those who blindly accept the goals set for them by others either parents or relatives. Such students need constant social appreciation for work, when under pressure their work concentration is declined, social comparisons and parental disappointment generates negative feelings towards self and others. When they encounter failure such students tend to blame their own self. They make detailed plans for improvement but due to lack of clarity and interest plans are not executed properly.

I choose medical because my father wanted me to become a doctor. He says I am good in biology and chemistry so I opted for medical in 12th. Medical is a very exhausting field. At times I feel I am just not made for it. I mean, to be honest, I am so ashamed that my parents had such high hopes for me but I am unable to keep up with the pressure and workload. Nothing helps. I may make a detailed study routine but something or the other will always come up and I am unable to follow it. I mean we live in a society right I cannot say no to my friend for a birthday party, or when the family is going for a wedding, people would call at that time only. But it cannot be ignored also. At times I feel I am not good enough. (Interviewee, 6, 18 Yrs old, Boy)

Thus, indicating that ignorance of self is a path to failure (see figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Thematic Network representing Global theme 3*



#### **Global theme 4: Failure as an Opportunity to Maintain Optimal Sense of Self**

Success and failure are sides of the same coin. They usually complement each other and thus help maintain the homeostatic or balance. *Ahamkara* includes the component of Individuality and separation. Individuality or the sense of uniqueness helps the students to feel special and thus escalates their self-esteem and performance. Similarly, separation refers to the sense of differentiation, meaning what is “I” and “not I”, this, in turn, builds their self-concepts and guides an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and actions towards self and others. Further, the component of Agency- stands for the sense of Doer-ship within an individual. It is reflected in the belief that ‘I am successful because I work hard. These components were found to be effective in achieving academic goals but to the threshold where confidence does not convert into overconfidence; pride does not convert into arrogance; accountability of one's actions does not convert into undue pressure on self. Herein, the role of failure becomes the major aspect during this transaction. Failure helps students to maintain an optimal level of *Ahamkara*, in terms of Individuality, separation, and agency. Failure provides students an opportunity to experience the self as one of the parts of a larger whole, wherein few aspects of life are not under the control of the self or are governed by unseen forces. This makes them feel limited and connects them to the world around them. Data reveals that high scorers were observed to be less socially oriented. Rather they were more self-focused or goal-directed. Thus, in times of difficulty, the role of parents, teachers, peers, and other significant members of the society makes them feel validated and united with the world.

This global theme can be understood in regard to two organizing themes. They are; Normalizing failure to maintain continuity in experiences of self; and social support integrates self to the larger world. The former organizing theme highlights the role of accepting ones’ failures in order to maintain continuity in experiences of self. In order to normalize failure students may utilize various approaches such as accepting ones' weakness, attributing it to uncontrollable external factors such as destiny, and/or overgeneralization of failure: “Not everybody is able to pass the examination in one shot. Normally

people take 2-3 attempts so it is okay for me to fail. I will try again” (Interviewee 2, 19 yrs, Boy).

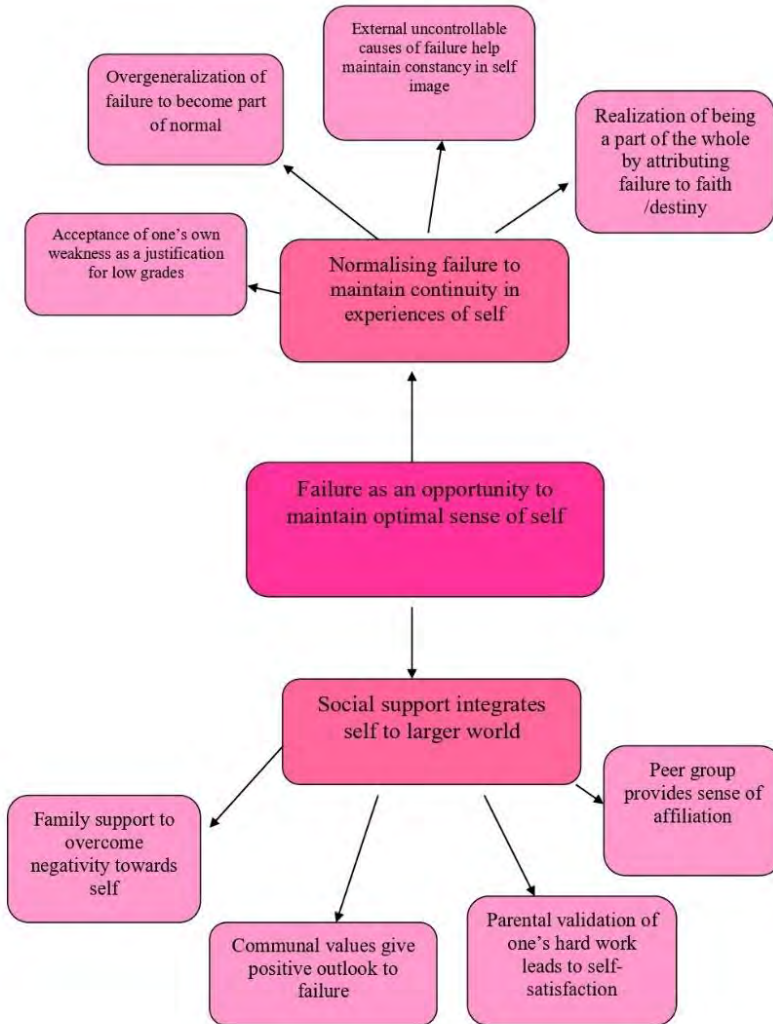
This helps students maintain continuity in their self-understanding and not breakdown. Finally, the social support the students receive from their parents, family, friends, and community values helps them to feel united with the world around them, which in turn helps in maintaining an optimal level of sense of self. Herein the Societal values and cultural norms may play a pivotal role in determining the perception of failure and deciding the future course of action. The following verbatim illustrates this idea:

We believe that whatever happens, happens for good and it is also written in Bhagavat Gita that you shall perform your necessary actions without any attachment to its outcome. So I believe that God has a greater plan for me and I shall keep working hard without attachment to the results. Failures are just a part of the journey. (Interviewee 5, 18 Yrs old, Girl)

These organizing themes can be understood in regard to 8 basic themes. These themes basically reflect failure as an opportunity to a) connect to the larger world by making social connections like family support, community connection, parental validation, and peer affiliation; and b) maintain the experience of self through acceptance of one’s weakness, overgeneralization of failure, external attribution of failure like destiny (see figure 4)

**Figure 4**

*Thematic Network representing Global theme 4*





Overall the results suggest an important role of *Ahamkara* in the academic performance of school students. Different elements play different roles in this relationship. Identification helps information and maintenance of one's self. A balanced sense of doer-ship motivates for hard work, moderate Individuality provides self-compassion and self-confidence towards goal attainment, and Connection with the larger world helps maintain consistency of self. This in turn affects one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

The major findings were curated based on the qualitative analysis. It was found that students form their sense of self which is based upon many factors like student's identification with the image of the school, attitude of the teachers, parental values, community values, peer associations, gender, grades, family functioning, and their personal achievements. Students learn adjustment with the institute and make adaptation to new demands which inculcates others' acceptance and preservation of self-image. In the process of identification, in-group and out-group feeling is developed which facilitates ones' behaviour according to group norms. Sense of security is achieved through forming associations with different groups also it helps in exploring the self which is helpful in promoting the growth, development and well-being. Self- understanding provides sense of individuality and separation that leads towards goal setting and goal attainment behaviour by self-evaluation, self-regulation, task analysis, and confidence. It was observed that when students have lack in self-knowledge, they accept the goals set by others and their poor performance may generate dissatisfaction and self-doubt. However, integration between self and work may lead to strengthen students' cognitive, emotional and behavioral engagement which may significantly promote the process of learning. Lack of self-exploration may make students' academic decisions superficial and utilize outcome lacking problem-solving routes. Sense of doer-ship encourages students to plan the course of action for goal attainment, whereas identification facilitates the execution of the planned actions. It is imperative that a balanced sense of self is vital for productive and optimal functioning, although extreme sense of self whether too much or too little may counter impact one's behaviour, attitude and overall functioning. Interestingly, failures also serve the purpose of maintaining a balanced sense of self by realising the role of limitations and shared existence in individual's life.

Overall, the findings of the present study have a vast scope of practical applications and research with respect to the Sense of self and its functioning.

## Implications

The objective of this current study was to understand the role of *Ahamkara* in the academic performance of senior secondary school students. The derived findings have multi-level implications. At the level of individuals, i.e. students, the results may be used at a meta-cognitive strategy to understand the concept of *Ahamkara*, how an individual identifies with the world around, the importance of self in regard with the work and goal attainment, the positive outlook towards failure and overall this comprehensive understanding would help student in exploring one's own behavior and modifying it in a meaningful direction. At the group level, the finding from this research may provide insights to the teachers and parents who are the major influence in the life of students in understanding the appropriate level of *Ahamkara* that needs to be promoted. Activities and modules can be developed to reinforce the appropriate component of *Ahamkara* in righteous directions. At the level of schools, the norms can be reflective of values and ethics that help students have a more meaningful contribution in their life in the long run such as the introduction of spiritual knowledge or moral lessons as a part of the curriculum. National Curriculum for School Education, NCERT (2007) included verses from “Bhagavad Gita” in the Sanskrit textbook of 12th standard. Sanskrit as a language has limited scope as students do not opt for it in large numbers especially when the options are wide such as French, Spanish, English, Hindi, and other languages. Productive incorporation like these should be motivated as they can lead to the overall development of the child. At the community level, the understanding of *Ahamkara* will help promote the righteous attitude towards self, one's relation with others, their work, and the world around them.

## Future Research Suggestions

The implications of the concept of *Ahamkara* are multi-folded and not limited to school students only, a sense of self exists in each individual and thus working population, old age, diseased/disabled population, and others can also be studied to dwell in the concept further. In similar contexts, A study conducted by Gupta and Aggarwal (2021) demonstrated that the lay

community has moderate *Ahamkara* levels, which decreases with age. Moreover, males were observed to have slightly higher levels of *Ahamkara* than females. Similar studies can be undertaken especially in a cross-cultural context. Various mental health conditions are associated with excessive *Ahamkara* such as Anxiety, depression, schizophrenia. In accordance with the findings, strategies can be evolved and utilised to cultivate an optimal level of *Ahamkara* to ensure well-being and positive mental health (Tayal et al., 2020). Identification with one's dehi (body) can further influence an individual's intra-personal and inter-personal relationship by influencing self-esteem, self-concept, and attitude. In the context of dehi (body), it is worth mentioning that various studies have been undertaken on body image in the Indian context (Dasgupta, 1998; Yadav, 2017). The relationship between body identification and interpersonal relationship can be explored for better understanding. More extensive research and broader theoretical framework will provide comprehensive understanding about the concept and its implications in the domain of personal life, education, work, and other areas of significance.

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