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Investigating causal factors of high Failure on GED Exit Tests

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The General Educational Development (GED) standardized high-stakes exit test is administered to dropout adults, as a second chance, without a high school credential to earn their jurisdiction's GED credential. Adult is defined as a person with a minimum age of 16 years old and over in most US States and territories (ACE, 2011).

The learning problem explored in this paper is about students' poor achievement on the GED exit tests. This learning problem is not only important globally but also locally. One of the disturbing global challenges is how to address the learning needs of millions of adults who lack a high school credential, every year (ACE, 2011). Most of these adults dropped out from 10th grade or higher. Such disturbing trend prompted government intervention to address students' achievements through legislation and accountability measures.

Students' achievement is one of the global indicators of accountability for quality learning and teaching advocated by US accrediting commissions such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC, 2012) and No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) legislations. Students' achievement is governed by the WASC's (2012) Standard II-Student Learning Programs and Services. WASC accredited the College of the Marshall Islands under which GED adult program was administered and managed. Similarly, the NCLB (2002) mandated that schools that do not improve by 2014 to 100% of their students' proficiency in reading and mathematics could have teachers and administrators fired, or be reconstituted or be closed down. Thus, GED test score is one of the important indicators of accountability for students' learning upon which students, teachers, and the institution are either rewarded or punished.

Based on the GED-CMI (2012) report on the GED raw test score for Marshallese candidates, about 90 percent failed the US-GED test. Passing the GED exam is very important because it is not only an accountability measure of teaching effectiveness but also demonstrated a level of knowledge equal to or greater than 40 percent of graduating high school seniors (ACE, 2011). There are many benefits of passing the GED test such as continue college education, employment opportunities, and also personal developments. Based on ACE (2011) report, about 95 percent of US colleges and universities accept GED graduates who meet other qualifications for admission. Similarly, about 96 percent of US employers accept the GED credential as equal to traditional high school diploma (ACE, 2011).

The literature proved the existence of failing students on GED tests in such studies as Gersten, Beckmann, Clark (2009); and McKinney, Chappell, Berry, Hickman (2009). Furthermore, Tyler and Magnus (2009) proved that there is no single causal factor to students' failure but many complicated variables. Meeker, Edmonson, and Fisher (2009) summarized these causal factors as push and pull factors. Push factors are those within the school's control whereas pull factors are those beyond the school's control.

Unfortunately, Meeker et al. (2009) found that the predominant causal factors are the pull factors which schools have no control over. This explains reasons why high failure persisted in GED exit tests. Examples of common pull factors that caused students' failure include pregnancy/parenting a child, bad attitudes/poor choice/truancy, failing the GED test, dysfunctional homes, working too many hours, moving too often, peer pressure to leave school, substance abuse, family illness/death, legal trouble, completing school in foreign countries, language barrier, to name a few (Meeker et al., 2009).

On the other hand, Ormsby (2011) found that one of the possible push factors contributing to high failure in the GED exit test was due to adult educational programs following the same curriculum as high schools. Most high schools focused on teaching facts and skills but not teaching thinking skills such as application, analysis, and evaluation which are tested on GED exit tests. So, adult students drop-out from GED program because they found it irrelevant and boring.

Similarly, Berliner (2011) summarized one of the push factors that caused students' failure due to teachers' narrowing of the curriculum. Narrowing the curriculum forces the teachers teaching to the test which is more pernicious to students' achievement.

Barrier-Ferrera (2008) did not support the idea of narrowing of the curriculum to increase the passing rate. He disagreed with narrowing the curriculum to content and selected skills as it limited students' creativity, it limited development and learning of the student as a whole person, and it did not consider students' prior learning experience (Hemmings & Kay, 2010) as important measure of students' current achievement.

Interestingly, Dalton, Glenie, Steven (2009) took an opposing view claiming that the predominant cause of students' failure pertained solely to school related factors or push factors such as failing grades and poor attitudes. This view was also supported by Ormsby (2011) who claimed that school related factors were solely the cause of adults failing, or dropping out because they found schooling boring and uninteresting and not relevant to their lives.

However, Meeker et al. (2009) refuted such views as bias because students' failing due to poor attitudes, boring and uninteresting schools are factors that are not only due to school related factors (push factors) but also influenced by factors beyond the school's control (pull factors).

Thus, the guiding question is: why Marshallese students fail the GED tests especially the US-GED battery. Given the importance of students' test scores advocated by NCLB (2002) and accrediting commissions, the hypothesis that could be made is that students' performance on GED tests is a reliable measure of students' achievement.

Collection of Archival or Public Data

The data available were collected from three data sources. The first GED test scores was compiled from the GED Testing center (ACE, 2011) and the second GED test scores was collected and compiled from the GED office, under the College of the Marshall Islands. These data were collected and analyzed in order to establish the number of students failing and the trend of failing students. The third data was gleaned from the Ministry of Education's (MOE-RMI, 2011) 2011 Annual Fiscal Report. The MOE data on dropout rates was collected in order to compare and identify the trend in failing and dropout students. These sources were public data because the public had access to them through the institution's websites or copies made available to interested persons or the public.

Table 1 below, shows a compiled sample of GED raw scores. The raw scores were extracted from source documents as follows:

Year	Semester	Location	#Pass	#Fail	# Pass: US- GED	#Fail: US- GED
2012	Spring	Majuro	20	2		
2012	Summer	Majuro	16	4	1	11
2012	Fall	Majuro	19	16		
2011	Spring	Majuro	15	27		
2011	Summer	Majuro	6	5	0	12
2010	Fall	Majuro	20	4		
2010	Spring	Majuro	11	3	3	12
2010	Spring	Majuro	33	0		

2010	Summer	Majuro	2	2	6	12
2009	Fall	Majuro	21	8		
2009	Spring	Majuro	24	1	4	12
2008	Spring	Majuro	26	7		
2008	Fall	Majuro	15	7	0	12

Table 1: GED Raw Score collected and compiled from GED-CMI (2012), ACE (2011)

Now analyzing Table 1 using percentage method, the result of the analysis is presented as

Table 2.

Year	Semester	RMI % Fail	% Pass US-GED	%Fail US-GED
2012	Spring	9%	8%	92%
2012	Summer	20%		
2012	Fall	46%		
2011	Spring	64%	0%	100%
2011	Summer	45%		
2010	Fall	17%	20%	80%
2010	Spring	21%		
2010	Spring	0%	33%	67%
2010	Summer	50%		
2009	Fall	28%	25%	75%
2009	Spring	4%		
2008	Spring	21%	0%	100%
2008	Fall	32%		

Table 2: Preliminary result of the Analysis of Table 1

Extracting relevant data from Table 2 and analyzing it further, the number of GED students who were failing and passing become clearer in Table 3:

	Av. % Fail in US-GED	Av. % Fail in RMI Math
2012	92%	25%
2011	100%	55%
2010	80%	22%
2009	75%	16%
2008	100%	27%

Table 3: Comparative analysis of US-GED and RMI

Analyzing Table 3 further through Microsoft Excel graphical representation, as shown in Figure 1, it shows a clearer comparative trend in the average failing rate of 90% in the US-GED test battery and 30% average failing rate in RMI GED test.

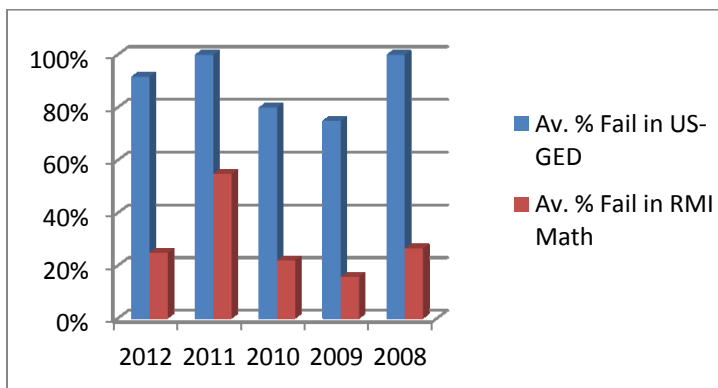


Figure 1: Comparative analysis of % of failures in the US-GED and RMI Math test scores based on Table 3.

To reiterate, based on Figure 1, it is evident that there is a higher failure of 90% students failing the US GED than 30% failing the RMI GED test. The RMI GED test is administered within the Marshall Islands' jurisdiction to adult dropout students without RMI high school equivalency diploma.

The data collected from MOE-RMI (2011) showed the dropout or failing rate by grade level and gender, in 2010 to 2011, shown as Table 4

Dropout Rate by Grade Level and Gender		
Grades	2010-2011	2010-2011
	Males	Females
1-8	35%	34%
9-12	48%	49%

Table 4: National Dropout Rate (MOE-RMI, 2011)

Comparing the failing rate on the RMI GED test of 30% with the overall dropout rate of 32% for both males and females from grades 1-12, even though both results were coincidentally

the same, it seemed to indicate correlational relationship. Table 4 proved the reality and the existence of failing students or dropouts experienced in the CMI-GED program.

Conclusion

Thus, the solutions to the guiding question, according to Kefallinou (2009), involve a comprehensive, multi-dimensional and contextual learner persistence effort to help students to persist long enough to achieve their goals. Truancy is one of the major pull factors that caused dropping out from the GED program. However, Kefallinou (2009) resolved truancy problems by involving student counselors to monitor and investigate truant students on a continuous basis. If the truant student is reaching the maximum number of truancy, the student would be called for counseling and would be interviewed for reasons for being truant. If the student was found to be truant on genuine reasons such as official work commitments and other genuine family matters which the institution could help, the student would be allowed to stop-out before they fail or dropout. The process of stopping-out is selective and involved weekly monitoring of students performance, offering flexibility in the students returning date, providing all materials for home-study to help students to catch up. This stop-out intervention is a creative solution that resolved both the push and pull factors (Meeker et al., 2009).

Another feasible solution is adopting engaging and creative pedagogies to meet the diverse learning need of GED at-risk students. Beach and Dovemark (2009) suggested utilizing engaging pedagogies such as personalized learning to meet students' varied learning styles especially students with learning disability. Diagnosing students' reading problems suggested by Jordan, Wylie, and Mulhern (2010) are ways to help identify students' weaknesses and develop students' multiple intelligence (Douglas, Burton, Reese-Durham, 2008). Barrier-Ferreira (2008)

advocated the concept of teaching the whole child based on Dewey's philosophy (Stuckart, Glanz, 2007) instead of teaching to the test due to narrowing of curriculum. Meeker et al (2009) strongly advocated for collaborative support from all stakeholders such as cooperative and supportive administrators, teachers, and staff; and continuous professional developments on new GED practice exam materials provided by the GED-Testing center (ACE, 2011).

The hypothesis made at the beginning whether performance on GED tests is a reliable measure of students' achievement is obviously bias or inaccurate. Shuster and Kate (2012) found that GED test scores per se is a bias measure of students' achievement. GED test score is a positive indicator of failures and dropping out of school (Shuster & Kate, 2012). Dalton, Glenie, and Steven (2009) found that the best relationship between GED Scores and achievements do not indicate causality but indicated complicated variables at play that determines students' success.

Reflection on the use of Technology in the Analysis

Based on my knowledge, and extensive experience and training in utilizing computer technology especially using Microsoft Word and Microsoft excel; I was able to collect data, stored them, and analyzed data sources using averages, percentages and graphing (Quazi, Talukder, 2011). However, Teo's work (2011) helped me to become aware of biases in data collection and analysis which could produce false results and false support for theories being tested.

Proposed Research Methodology

Method

Proposed research design

A qualitative ethnographic research method will be adopted in this proposal (Beach and Dovemark, 2009). The rationale for adopting an ethnographic research method is to extract a comprehensive perspective or a thick-description from the participants, Marshallese teachers' perception of why so many Marshallese students fail the GED exit test within context of the Marshallese cultural setting.

Methods of Data Collection and analysis:

The sampling method will be a purposeful sampling of selected focus group - Marshallese GED teachers, selected individual representatives from other schools, and the supervisor as a peer debriefer. The rationale for choosing the focus group is to promote interaction and open-ended discussions among Marshallese teachers about their experiences with the GED test. A topic will be identified for each session and open-ended questions will be encouraged in the focus-group discussion in order to delve deeper into the learning problem. The instruments to be used are: fieldwork diaries and field notes, formal interviews lasting 50 minutes each session, 350 hours of preliminary visits, over one half years of observation and data collection and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The IRB rules and regulations will be strictly followed when it comes to collection of data from interviews etc. To control for bias no Marshallese teacher will be selected with whom

the researcher has a prior relationship or acquaintance. Participants will be assured that all comments will be kept confidential and that their participation is voluntary.

Themes, Topics and Coding

Each teacher will receive a copy of the transcribed notes to review for comments and additions following the focus group discussion and individual interview sessions. In addition, member checks will be conducted in which participants will receive a copy of the write-up report of each session to provide feedback on its accuracy and completeness. The researcher will review the transcripts from each session and identify issues or themes that need further investigation. A peer debriefer will critique each transcribed notes and the overall write ups.

Recommendations for future studies

This is the first study conducted to investigate factors contributing to high failure of Marshallese students' on GED tests. The research findings would form the basis of future policy reviews and improvements and also provide a platform from which future studies could be based on.

Reflection of what I encountered and how it will prepare me for doctoral study.

Reflecting on what I encountered while planning this final application assignment 8.1, I found that researching early on the topic, managing my time well are some of the two important variables that could determine success or failure. I realized that a number of my preconceived ideas about research topic and research results were inaccurate. As I continue my research on the research question, based on my topic, I found that my topic was not only broad but also yields a few research studies done on the subject. I realized also that through literature review, students' failure is not caused by just one single factor but many complicating variables. Meeker,

Edmonson, and Fisher (2009) summarized these factors into two: push factors (school related factors) and pull factors (outside school factors). One of the reasons why schools keep on producing failing students is due to the predominance of pull factors which most schools had no control over. One of the important findings in this study is policy recommendations on improving Marshallese students' achievement on GED tests that would open doors of opportunity to students and thus fulfill Walden University's goal of fostering positive social change. Finally, I am glad that this assignment has opened my eyes and prepared me to meet the rigors of research that I will expect in my doctorate studies.

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