


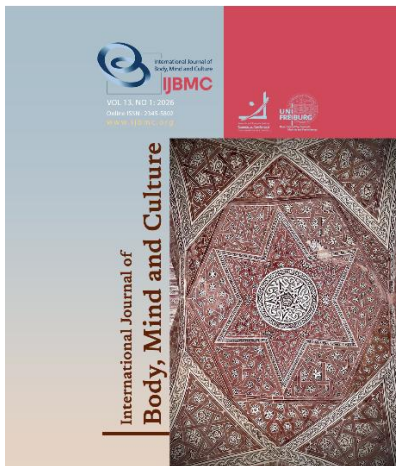
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# Exploring the Causes of Success and Failure Among Students Preparing for the University Entrance Examination: A Grounded Theory Study

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#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to explore the causes of success and failure among students preparing for the university entrance examination.

**Methods and Materials:** This qualitative study was conducted using a grounded theory design based on the Strauss and Corbin approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 87 participants selected through purposive-theoretical sampling, including academic counselors, parents of students with high and low examination ranks, and students with high and low ranks. Data analysis was performed through open, axial, and selective coding. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

**Findings:** The findings showed that success factors were organized into seven major categories: individual, family, school, examination preparation process, peer-related, study-related, and social factors. Important success-related factors included mental health, self-awareness, career exploration and planning, academic self-efficacy, study skills, motivation, family support, parenting style, teacher behavior, school climate, supportive peers, and appropriate study conditions. Failure factors were organized into eight major categories: individual, family, school, peer-related, examination preparation process, study-related, social, and economic factors. Major failure-related factors included poor mental health, weak study skills, erroneous beliefs, unhealthy lifestyle, lack of self-awareness, lack of career exploration and planning, family tension, weak parental involvement, negative school climate, lack of teacher support, discouraging peers, demotivation, and financial difficulties.

**Conclusion:** Success and failure in the university entrance examination are multidimensional phenomena shaped by the interaction of individual, family, school, educational, and social factors. Understanding these interconnected influences may help educational planners, counselors, and families develop more effective strategies to support students' academic performance.

**Keywords:** Students, Educational Measurement, Academic Failure, Educational Status, Career Choice.

## Introduction

One of the most important challenges currently facing the country's educational system is the university entrance examination, because success or failure in continuing higher education is among the central concerns of any educational system. Academic success and progress in a society reflect the success of the educational system in goal attainment and in addressing individual needs. Therefore, when students at different educational levels achieve the highest ranks and performance levels, the educational system can be considered efficient and successful. However, since the 1980s, the growth in the student population seeking university admission, together with the limited capacity of universities, has created a barrier for young people in the form of the university entrance examination (Seddigh et al., 2016).

Success in the university entrance examination, or high school students' performance on this test, depends not only on individual talent and effort but also on abilities and processes that develop throughout students' educational and life experiences. Therefore, understanding students' academic functioning across different stages of education, as well as the contextual characteristics in which they have grown up, is of considerable importance (Salimi & Pasalari, 2017). Academic achievement is one of the major indicators of the quality of an educational system, because it provides the information needed to identify certain limitations and deficiencies within that system and to propose sound scientific solutions for addressing them. Determining which factors influence students' academic progress and success, and the extent to which each factor contributes, has always been an important area of interest for researchers in educational sciences (Niromand et al., 2020).

Academic achievement plays an important role in education, especially at the high school level. In many countries, for example Turkey, students' performance on the higher education examination is the most important factor determining their admission (Börkan & Bakis, 2016). In general, academic success, especially success in the national university entrance examination, depends on many factors. Essentially, examining the causes of success requires a systematic and comprehensive perspective (Niromand et al., 2020). Individual factors

such as having clear goals, high motivation, appropriate study methods, planning, and mental concentration; school-related factors such as teacher-student relationships, teachers' instructional skills, educational conditions, learning facilities, classroom climate, school resources, examinations and assessment methods, and teachers' general and professional competence; as well as family and social factors such as family security, the emotional climate of the family, the family's economic conditions, family value systems, family education and culture, parent-teacher communication, family size, and employment, are all considered among the factors contributing to success in the university entrance examination (Nezhad & Nezhad, 2014; Niromand et al., 2020).

In Iran, one of the demands that has a significant impact on an individual's life is the national university entrance examination. Success or failure in this examination plays an important role in one's future career, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, self-concept, and later interpretations of success and failure (Nazari Chamak, 2022). Given that one of the criteria for the efficiency of an educational system is the rate of academic success and failure, identifying and examining the factors affecting academic performance can contribute to improving the effectiveness of the educational system. Therefore, investigating the factors associated with academic success is one of the fundamental topics of research in educational systems (Eghdamboushehr, 2023).

Academic success depends on a variety of factors, and identifying these factors can help in determining strategies for achieving success and preventing academic decline. This can assist educational planners in strengthening positive influences and reducing the impact of negative ones (Zare et al., 2013). Analyzing the factors associated with success in the university entrance examination is an important step in students' academic careers and helps them manage this process. Moreover, analyzing these factors contributes not only to university admission but also to students' professional lives more broadly (Ilhan-Beyaztas & Göçer-Sahin, 2018).

Because families and society bear considerable costs in supporting students' access to higher education, a careful examination of the factors underlying students' success and failure can provide a useful path toward a better societal understanding of educational approaches

(Niromand et al., 2020). The main question addressed in the present study is: What are the reasons for students' success and failure in the university entrance examination? Although common sense and personal experience offer various answers to this question, and some previous studies, including those by Iranpour (Nazari Chamak, 2022; Nourbakhsh & Haeri, 2011), have reported relevant findings, no study was found that examined this issue through a qualitative approach aimed at gaining a deep understanding of individuals' experiences. Therefore, the present study seeks to investigate the causes of students' success and failure in the university entrance examination using a qualitative method.

## Methods and Materials

### Study Design

This study employed a qualitative grounded theory design. Grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the researcher develops a general explanation of a process, action, or interaction based on the views of a large number of participants. This qualitative design was introduced in sociology in 1967 by two researchers, Glaser & Strauss (1998) Glaser and Strauss. The aim of grounded theory is to go beyond description and generate or discover a theory; in other words, to provide an abstract conceptual framework for a process. Two common approaches to grounded theory are the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin and the constructivist approach of Charmaz (Creswell, 2015). The present study used the Strauss and Corbin approach.

The sample of this study consisted of academic counselors, parents of students, and students who had obtained ranks below 1000 or above 12000 in the national university entrance examination. The sampling method was purposive-theoretical sampling. Based on the principle of saturation, 87 participants were selected for interview, including 15 academic counselors, 24 parents of students ranked above 12000, 24 parents of students ranked below 1000, 12 students ranked above 12000, and 12 students ranked below 1000. Before the interviews, participants were given explanations about the interview procedure, and their permission was obtained for audio recording. Open-ended questions were used in the interviews, and the content was both written down and audio recorded simultaneously.

During the interviews, whenever additional questions that could help clarify the topic came to mind, they were also asked of the interviewees. Interviews with all three groups continued until no new information was obtained. All interviews conducted with parents, counselors, and students were recorded, transcribed, and converted into text. The texts were then read one by one, and the concepts contained in them were coded.

At this stage, which is referred to as initial text coding or open coding, the core concepts, themes, or codes were extracted. In open coding, a relatively large number of concepts were identified. These concepts were named according to the researcher's interpretation, although the naming remained closely tied to the data. Open coding continued until no new information could be derived from the text and it was ensured that all concepts present in the text had been captured under a code.

In the next stage, through axial coding, several concepts or codes that shared common meaning and content were grouped under a single category. Axial coding involves a higher level of abstraction and seeks the underlying patterns in the text. Therefore, this method resulted in a deeper description of the data. Finally, selective coding was carried out, through which the main theme, namely the factors underlying academic success and academic failure, was identified.

### Instruments

The data collection instrument used in this study was the interview method. This method of data collection is commonly used to explore and investigate individuals' feelings, motivations, attitudes, actions, and experiences, and consists of the interviewer's verbal questions and the participants' verbal responses. Compared with questionnaires, the advantages of the interview method include its adaptability, its ability to gain interviewees' trust, and its potential to obtain more complete information from them. Interviewing is a technical activity used to gain access to people's views, to understand how their shared perceptions are formed, and to identify the motivations behind their decision-making and their perceptions of specific lived experiences under study (Hariri, 2015).

In line with the objectives of the present study, interviews were conducted with counselors, parents, and students. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. For this purpose, two main questions were asked of the participants: "What are the causes of

success in the university entrance examination?” and “What are the causes of failure in the university entrance examination?” Additional questions were also asked during the interviews as needed.

**Findings and Results**

*Research Question 1: What are the causes of success among students preparing for the university entrance examination?*

To answer this question, the grounded theory method was used. In the interview phase with parents, students, and academic counselors, all interviews were first audio-recorded, transcribed, and converted into written text. The texts were then read one by one, and the concepts embedded in them were coded.

These concepts are presented in Tables 1 through 5. In the first column, quotations related to each concept are provided. In the initial stage of coding, which was conducted through open coding, a relatively large number of concepts were extracted. These concepts

were labeled based on the researcher’s interpretation, although the labels remained closely connected to the quotations. Open coding continued until no new information emerged from the texts and it was ensured that all relevant concepts had been identified as codes. In the next stage, through axial coding, several concepts or codes with shared meanings were grouped under a common category. Axial coding involves a higher level of abstraction and produces a deeper description of the text. Finally, the subcategories were integrated into broader main categories, referred to as the core themes, through selective coding. Selective coding corresponded to the main subject under investigation. A summary of the results is presented in Table 1 as a sample of the interviews with counselors, Table 2 as a sample of the interviews with parents of students ranked below 1000, Table 3 as a sample of the interviews with parents of students ranked above 12000, Table 4 as a sample of the interviews with students ranked below 1000, and Table 5 as a sample of the interviews with students ranked above 12000.

**Table 1**

*Summary of the results of interview analysis with academic counselors using grounded theory*

Meaning Unit / Example	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
“Psychological disorders such as bipolar disorder and depression lead to failure.”	Bipolar disorder and depression	Mental health	Individual factors
“Personality disorders such as obsessional traits, because of perfectionism and sensitivity to others’ judgment, lead to loss of motivation.”	Personality disorder	Personality	Individual factors
“If academic problems are not identified and treated in time, they lead to failure in the examination.”	Academic difficulties	Adaptability	Individual factors
“Students with greater tolerance for ambiguity are more successful than those with low tolerance.”	Tolerance for ambiguity	Personality	Individual factors
“Many students do not understand their own minds; for example, when anxiety comes, they do not know what to do.”	Mindfulness / self-awareness	Cognitive flexibility	Individual factors
“Often, because they lack acceptance, they show avoidant behaviors and run away from the issue.”	Acceptance	Cognitive flexibility	Individual factors
“Students who are committed move calmly and consistently, have clear goals, know their values, and see their goals as attainable.”	Commitment, persistence	goals, Goal orientation / adaptability	Individual factors
“Family is very important. If the father or mother has psychological problems, they can become obstacles.”	Parents’ psychological disorders	Mental health	Family factors
“How many facilities the school has, whether the environment is calm, and whether it is student-centered matter a lot.”	Facilities and environment	calm Educational environment	School factors
“Friendly peer environments, where studying matters but there is no toxic competition, secrecy, or lack of support, are good for success.”	Friendly environment	Peer support	Peer factors
“A compassionate atmosphere at home and at school strongly affects success. Stressful and competitive environments can lead to failure.”	Compassion at home and school	Compassion	Family and school factors
“Having access to facilities is one of the factors of success.”	Access to facilities	Educational facilities	School factors
“Self-knowledge is very important. A student should know their type and what they want during the examination year.”	Self-awareness	Adaptability	Individual factors
“Being in a school with many successful students helps because the student learns from their methods and plans.”	Presence of previously successful students	Educational environment	School factors
“Students’ self-efficacy is very important.”	Self-efficacy	Self-efficacy	Individual factors
“The relationship between parents, how intimate and kind they are, and how influential they are, matters.”	Kindness and influence	Parental relationships	Family factors

“Families that focus excessively on the examination and abandon their own lives may contribute to failure.”	Excessive focus on the examination	Family climate	Family factors
“Having a plan is also very important.”	Planning	Personality	Individual factors

Table 1 presents a summary of the results obtained from the analysis of interviews with academic counselors regarding the factors influencing students’ success and failure in the university entrance examination. Analysis of the interviews with 15 academic counselors yielded 8 selective codes (main categories) and 44 axial codes. The results showed that, from the counselors’ perspective, individual factors played a central role in both success and failure. These factors included mental health, personality, adaptability, self-awareness, cognitive flexibility, self-efficacy, intelligence, study skills, metacognition, motivation, resilience, emotional intelligence, purposefulness, spirituality, and academic fit. Counselors also emphasized that conditions such as bipolar disorder, depression, personality disorders, perfectionism, low tolerance for ambiguity, poor self-awareness, lack of acceptance, and weak commitment could seriously interfere with students’ progress. Family-related factors also emerged as highly influential. According to the counselors, parents’ own psychological difficulties, the emotional quality of parental relationships, the general

atmosphere of the home, parental overinvolvement in the examination process, and unrealistic pressure could either facilitate or hinder success. A supportive and compassionate family environment was described as beneficial, whereas psychological disturbances in parents, family tension, and excessive focus on the examination were associated with failure.

School-related factors included the quality of the educational environment, the availability of facilities, the school climate, teacher behavior, and the presence of successful role models among former students. Counselors believed that schools with calm, student-centered environments and a history of successful university entrance examination results could positively shape students’ performance. They also highlighted the role of peers, noting that supportive and non-toxic peer environments were more conducive to success. In addition, compassion in the home and at school, appropriate educational facilities, and positive peer support were repeatedly emphasized as contributing factors.

**Table 2**

*Summary of interview results with parents of students ranked below 1000 using grounded theory*

Open Coding / Concepts	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Perseverance	Personality	Individual factors
Support	Parenting style	Family factors
Support	Parental involvement	Family factors
Calmness at home	Parenting style	Family factors
Monitoring	Parenting style	Family factors
Helping siblings	Family member support	Family factors
Equal treatment of son and daughter	Parenting style	Family factors
Not discussing problems in front of children	Parental relationships	Family factors
Intimacy between parents	Parental relationships	Family factors
Kindness	Parental relationships	Family factors
Being trustworthy for children	Parenting style	Family factors
Asking children’s opinions in family decisions	Parenting style	Family factors
Traveling together as a family	Attachment / cohesion	Family factors
Learning is more important than grades	Goal orientation	Family factors
Communication with school staff	Parental involvement	Family factors
Motivating students	Teacher behavior	School factors
Support in front of others	Parental involvement	Family factors
Contentment	Personality	Individual factors
Giving gifts	Compassion	Family factors
Mutual respect between spouses	Parental relationships	Family factors

Table 2 shows a sample of the findings from interviews with parents of highly successful students.

From the interviews with 12 parents, 26 axial codes and 7 selective codes were extracted. The findings indicated

that the parents of successful students placed strong emphasis on family support, parental participation, parenting style, calmness at home, and healthy parental relationships. These parents described their children as persistent, disciplined, and psychologically supported. They reported that they avoided imposing stress on their children and instead reinforced confidence by expressing belief in their abilities.

Parental involvement appeared in multiple forms, such as staying home with the child during important study periods, reducing the child's household responsibilities, monitoring mobile phone use, maintaining emotional closeness, and building trust. Some parents emphasized equality in treatment of sons

and daughters, consultation with children in family decisions, and preserving a peaceful home atmosphere. Strong parental relationships, such as mutual respect, affection, and avoiding conflict in front of children, were also frequently mentioned. The findings further suggested that family cohesion, compassion, respect, and emotional support were essential elements in the success of these students. Parents also highlighted communication with the school, participation in school meetings, close relationships with teachers, and the motivational role of teachers. In addition, characteristics of the students themselves, such as perseverance, contentment, and responsibility, were reported as important individual factors.

**Table 3**

*Summary of interview analysis with students ranked above 12000 using grounded theory*

Text Unit / Example	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
"I did not study with a clear purpose."	Lack of goal	Personality	Individual factors
"I was not familiar with the examination and university."	Lack of familiarity with the examination	Lack of information	Individual factors
"It was not clear that I should study from this hour to that hour:"	Lack of planning	Personality	Individual factors
"I participated in Gaj trial exams."	Participation in trial exams	Examination preparation process	Examination preparation factors
"School was very influential. A friend told me to move to a better school, but I did not, and he later got a very good rank."	Moving to a better school	Educational environment	School factors
"Teachers motivated us, but unfortunately they were not very examination-oriented."	Teachers not oriented toward the examination	Teacher skill	School factors
"My close friends were not very studious."	Friends' study habits	Peer climate	Peer factors
"I liked some subjects and studied them, but I ignored the subjects I did not like."	Interest in only some subjects	Interest	Individual factors
"Unfortunately, the home environment was not good; my grandmother lived with us and there were many visitors."	Frequent visitors / unsuitable home atmosphere	Family climate	Family factors
"No one told me anything about university itself."	Lack of information about university	Lack of information	School factors
"Unfortunately, I had no idea about university."	Lack of information about university	Lack of information	Individual factors
"The most important factor for a good rank is motivation and knowing one's goal, which I did not have."	Lack of motivation and awareness	Motivation	Individual factors
"I liked studying, but I had no goal or awareness."	Interest without goal	Lack of goal	Individual factors
"Teachers should provide more awareness and information about university."	Teachers not providing enough information	Lack of information	School factors
"I attended a good high school, but teachers did not give much information."	Lack of informative teachers	Lack of information / teacher factors	School factors
"Order and discipline are very important, and I did not have them during the examination year."	Lack of discipline	Personality	Individual factors

Table 3 presents a sample of the results from interviews with students who obtained ranks above 12000. Analysis of these interviews yielded 6 axial codes and 7 selective codes. The results showed that lack of clear goals, lack of planning, insufficient awareness about the examination and university system, weak motivation, and limited educational guidance were among the major reasons for lower performance.

Some students stated that they had no clear schedule for studying, no real understanding of how the university entrance examination worked, and little knowledge about university life itself. Others explained that although they were interested in some subjects, they avoided studying those they disliked. Several students pointed to weaknesses in the school environment, including teachers who were not sufficiently oriented

toward examination preparation, a lack of useful information from teachers, and failure of schools to provide adequate guidance about university and future academic pathways. Peer influences and family atmosphere were also significant. Some students reported that their close friends were not academically serious, while others mentioned that their home

environment was not suitable for concentrated study because of frequent visitors or a lack of an examination-focused family climate. Lack of discipline, weak motivation, lack of self-knowledge, and limited information were repeatedly identified as important individual factors contributing to failure.

**Table 4**

*Results of interview analysis with parents of students ranked below 1000*

Text Unit / Example	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
"My child was very interested in studying."	Interest	Interest / exploration	Individual factors
"I kept the study environment quiet and private."	Calmness at home	Parenting style	Family factors
"The schools attended were mostly ordinary public schools, but the high school was one of the good schools."	Good school	Educational environment	School factors
"We advised the child a lot, especially the father."	Advising	Parenting style	Family factors
"There was a lot of competition with siblings, especially the older sister."	Competitiveness	Achievement motivation	Individual factors
"The father praised the child a lot in social gatherings."	Support	Parental involvement	Family factors
"The father maintained strong contact with the school."	Support	Parental involvement	Family factors
"The child had a lot of motivation and said, 'I must get the top rank.'"	Motivation	Exploration / achievement motivation	Individual factors
"The child said, 'You have worked so hard; I will not let your efforts go to waste.'"	Gratitude	Spirituality / values	Individual factors
"The child had great perseverance."	Perseverance	Personality	Individual factors
"The child likes to be above everyone else."	Perfectionism / competitiveness	Personality	Individual factors
"I treated the child kindly and understood them very well."	Support	Parental involvement	Family factors
"It was not the case that we canceled all visits during the examination year; we were not overly strict."	Lack of excessive strictness	Parental involvement	Family factors
"The child used Option 2 trial exams."	Participation in exams	Examination preparation process	Examination preparation factors
"Teachers were very encouraging, especially the principal."	Cooperation / encouragement	Teacher participation	Educational climate factors

Table 4 presents the results from interviews with 12 parents whose children had obtained ranks below 1000. From these interviews, 26 axial codes and 7 selective codes were extracted. The findings again highlighted the importance of both individual and family factors in success. Parents described their children as interested in studying, achievement-oriented, persistent, and motivated. In several cases, academic competition with siblings appeared to foster achievement motivation. Parents also pointed to gratitude, spirituality, and a desire not to waste parental efforts as meaningful motivational forces. Family-related factors included keeping the home calm, offering encouragement,

showing affection and understanding, and maintaining reasonable expectations. Parents reported that they did not impose excessive pressure and instead provided supportive conditions. Some explained that their children studied primarily at home rather than in libraries or other environments, suggesting that a familiar and emotionally secure environment was beneficial. They also referred to constructive relationships with school staff, motivational support from teachers and school administrators, and participation in trial examinations as important aspects of the examination preparation process.

Table 5

Results of interview analysis with parents of students ranked above 12000 using grounded theory

Meaning Unit / Example	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
"The child really did not study and did not do what was necessary."	Not studying	Parental expectations / study behavior	Individual factors
"There was no competition at school, and because the child got good grades, they thought the entrance examination would be like school exams."	Lack of competition at school; assuming the examination was like school exams	School climate / irrational belief	School and individual factors
"It was very difficult for the child to start studying."	Difficulty starting study	Parenting style / initiation difficulty	Individual factors
"When I told the child to study, they became upset, so I decided not to say anything anymore."	Becoming upset when told to study	Personality	Individual factors
"The school level was low."	Low school quality	School climate	School factors
"Teachers had said there was no need to read extra books and that school textbooks were enough."	Teacher advice	Teacher behavior	School factors
"The child had excessive confidence in themselves."	Overconfidence	Excessive self-confidence	Individual factors
"The child slept until 10 or 11 in the morning and spent time on the phone and television."	Sleeping late, phone use, television, not studying	Lifestyle	Individual factors
"The child did not attend preparatory classes, extra school classes, or counseling."	Not attending preparation classes or counseling	Examination preparation process	Examination preparation factors
"The child attended Option 2 trial exams in the third year but got no results."	Participation in Option 2 exams without result	Examination preparation for the examination	Examination preparation factors
"The child attended five Sanjesh tests after Nowruz, but I knew they had not studied."	Participation in Sanjesh tests	Examination preparation process	Examination preparation factors
"Maybe the child was too hopeful about themselves and did not realize that this amount of information was not enough."	Unrealistic hope in oneself	Parental expectations	Individual factors
"If forced, the child does the task well, but rarely initiates tasks on their own."	Only working under pressure	Procrastination / personality	Individual factors
"There is no shouting at home; if there is a problem, we talk about it."	Solving issues through conversation	Family climate	Family factors
"Even though the school was private, teachers did not know beyond the textbook."	Weak teachers	Teacher skill	School factors
"I did not have much contact with the school, but I attended the meetings."	Limited contact with school	School communication	School factors
"Because I thought my daughter had high ability, I had high expectations and kept reminding her."	Worry and repeated reminders	Parental expectations	Family factors
"I suggested the library, but the child said it created stress."	Not studying; stress in the library	Study environment difficulty	Individual factors

Table 5 presents the results from interviews with 12 parents of students who obtained ranks above 12000 in the national university entrance examination. Analysis of these interviews yielded 30 axial codes and 8 selective codes. The findings showed that these parents frequently referred to problems such as poor study habits, overconfidence, procrastination, weak lifestyle management, lack of participation in preparatory classes, and inadequate use of counseling services.

Some parents believed that their children wrongly assumed that doing well in regular school examinations would automatically translate into success in the university entrance examination. Others referred to low-quality schools, weak teachers, and inadequate academic guidance. Several parents mentioned that their children

had difficulty starting to study, reacted negatively when urged to study, spent long hours sleeping or using phones and television, and did not meaningfully engage with preparation classes or counseling services. Family-related findings were more mixed in this group. Some parents described calm households and constructive communication, yet still reported low performance in their children. Others referred to their own excessive expectations, repeated reminders, worry, and difficulty finding a balanced level of involvement. The results suggest that even in families without overt conflict, lack of effective guidance, unrealistic assumptions about the child's abilities, and limited awareness of the actual demands of the examination process could contribute to failure.

**Table 6***Summary of interview findings on the causes of success and failure in the university entrance examination*

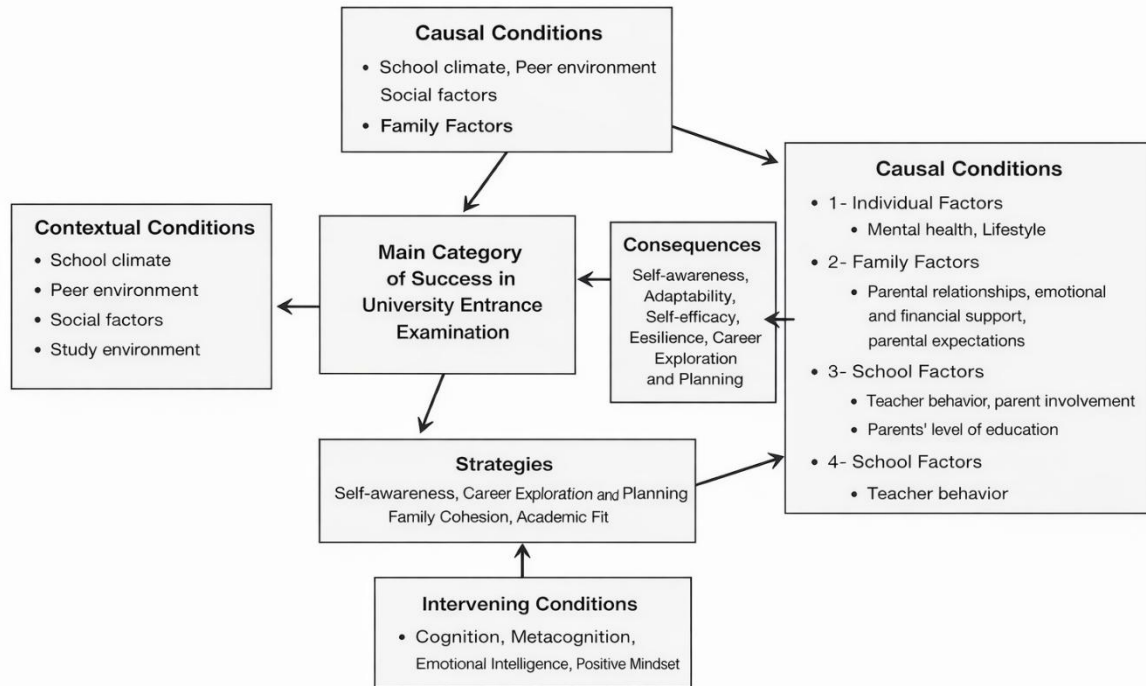
<b>Interview Group</b>	<b>Main Domain</b>	<b>Most Important Success Factors</b>	<b>Most Important Failure Factors</b>
Academic counselors	Individual	Mental health, self-awareness, adaptability, personality, cognitive flexibility, self-efficacy, intelligence, study skills, metacognition, motivation, resilience, emotional intelligence, purposefulness, spirituality, academic fit	Anxiety and depression, obsessive and mood disorders, perfectionism, emotional instability, weak study skills and planning, disruptive emotional relationships, irrational beliefs, unhealthy lifestyle, insecure attachment, lack of awareness, negative feedback, failure schema, academic mismatch
Academic counselors	Family	Emotional and financial support, positive parental relationships, parental involvement, compassion, balanced expectations, parental understanding of the child, family education, calm home environment	Family tension, excessive pressure and focus on the examination, lack of parental involvement, family unawareness, parents' psychological problems, excessive expectations, ineffective parenting style
Academic counselors	School	Appropriate school climate, supportive educational environment, compassion at school, educational facilities, positive teacher behavior, examination skills training	Unhealthy competition, school pressure and stress, negative teacher behavior, discouraging feedback, lack of proper study atmosphere
Academic counselors	Examination preparation process	Planning, review, trial tests, suitable resources, expert counselor or classes, examination simulation	Inappropriate classes and programs, negative feedback from supporters, unqualified counselors, excessive pressure from examination programs
Academic counselors	Study, peers, social, and economic	Study environment suited to personality, supportive and motivating friends	Inappropriate study environment, discouraging friends, problematic examination structure, commercialization of the examination, social demotivation, job and economic problems
Parents of successful students	Individual	Perseverance, interest, talent, intelligence, child's psychological calmness	—
Parents of successful students	Family	Supportive parenting style, parental involvement, family cohesion, clear rules, realistic expectations, appropriate lifestyle, parents' education, respect for the child's choice, good parental relationships, compassion, support, intimacy, family as role model	In this group, failure factors were mentioned less often, and emphasis was mainly placed on the family's role in facilitating success
Parents of successful students	School and examination preparation	Encouraging teachers, school with a positive climate, purposeful use of tests and supplementary books	Some parents opposed outside classes when they created pressure or were too stereotyped
Parents of successful students	Peers and social	Studious friends, positive competition, positive social prestige, suitable examination session conditions	Problems in examination session conditions could reduce performance
Successful students (rank below 1000)	Individual	Responsible and well-planned personality, self-efficacy, spirituality, achievement motivation, interest in the field, study skills, intelligence, relatively balanced lifestyle	—
Successful students (rank below 1000)	Family	Calm family atmosphere, emotional and financial support, educated role models, motivating expectations, family cohesion	—
Successful students (rank below 1000)	School, preparation, and study	Good school, motivating teachers, review, proper resource selection, trial tests, suitable study environment, sometimes beneficial use of Nowruz study camps	Some libraries or rigid environments were reported as unsuitable for certain students
Successful students (rank below 1000)	Peers	Supportive friends, collaborative problem-solving, constructive competition	Negative or discouraging friends could hinder progress
Counselors regarding unsuccessful students	Individual	—	Mental health problems, perfectionism, weak study skills, disruptive emotional relationships, irrational beliefs, disorderly lifestyle, insecure attachment, lack of information, involvement with virtual space, negative feedback, hopelessness, failure schema, academic mismatch
Parents of unsuccessful students	Individual and family	—	Excessive self-confidence, procrastination, academic decline, lack of awareness, family tension, financial problems, expectations that were too low or too high, inappropriate home environment
Unsuccessful students (rank above 12000)	Individual	—	Lack of planning, low self-efficacy, weak test-taking skills, anxiety, lack of awareness about the examination and academic fields, false self-confidence, academic decline, poor comprehension, emotional involvement
Unsuccessful students (rank above 12000)	Family, school, peers, social	—	Lack of support and trust, tense family atmosphere, unsuitable school, teachers not oriented toward the examination or creating pressure, unmotivated friends, classroom comparisons,

Table 6 summarizes the interview findings regarding the causes of success and failure in the university entrance examination. The results obtained from interviews with counselors, parents, and students showed that success and failure in the examination are multi-causal phenomena and cannot be reduced merely to academic ability or amount of study. Across all three groups of interviewees, individual factors were identified as the most important and most frequently mentioned domain. Among the individual factors associated with success, the most important components were mental health, self-efficacy, motivation, study skills, purposefulness, intelligence, resilience, and academic fit. In contrast, anxiety, depression, obsessive tendencies, perfectionism, weak planning, lack of awareness, negative feedback, and low motivation were among the most frequently identified causes of failure.

After individual factors, the family emerged as the main context either supporting or undermining student performance. Families of successful students were generally characterized by appropriate emotional relationships, financial and psychological support, balanced expectations, participation in academic matters, a calm home environment, and respect for the student's interests. In contrast, family tension, excessive pressure, unrealistic expectations, ineffective parenting styles, and lack of parental awareness were considered major contributors to failure. At the school level, the findings showed that school climate, teacher behavior, educational quality, and the competitive or supportive nature of the school environment had substantial effects on students' academic outcomes. Schools with calm atmospheres, encouraging teachers, and appropriate educational planning appeared to provide stronger

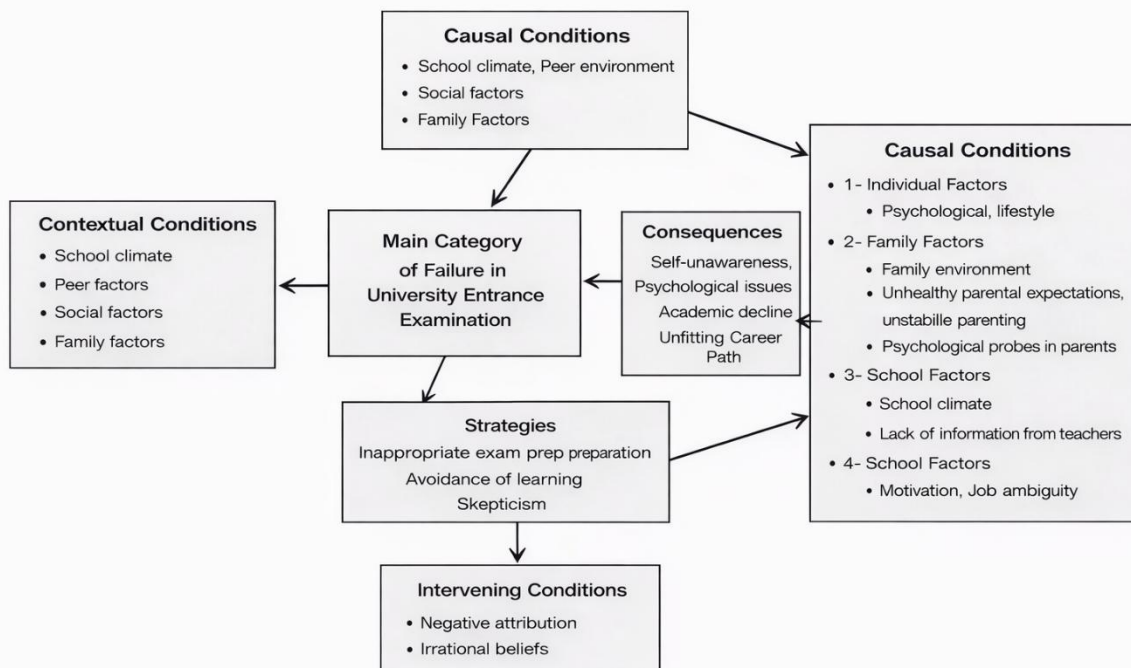
foundations for success. By contrast, unhealthy competition, psychological pressure, comparison, and negative feedback were likely to contribute to academic decline. The process of preparing for the university entrance examination, including the use of trial examinations, supplementary resources, preparatory classes, and counseling, was effective only when it was aligned with the student's personal characteristics and guided by competent specialists. Otherwise, the same process could become a source of anxiety, comparison, and burnout.

Finally, the findings showed that peers, the study environment, social and economic conditions, and the examination structure itself also played important complementary roles. Friends could either serve as sources of motivation or act as barriers. The study environment needed to be compatible with the student's personality characteristics. Broader conditions such as uncertainty about future employment, the commercialization of the university entrance examination, economic problems, and weaknesses in the educational system also contributed to reduced motivation and increased the likelihood of failure. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that success in the university entrance examination is the result of a balanced interaction among individual, family, school, educational, and social factors. Among these, mental health, motivation, self-efficacy, study skills, family support, and a positive educational climate were the strongest predictors of success, whereas anxiety, family and school pressure, weak study skills, lack of awareness, and social demotivation were the most important contexts associated with failure.



**Figure 1**

*Success Model in the University Entrance Examination*



**Figure 2**

*Failure Model in the University Entrance Examination*

## Discussion and Conclusion

The main objective of the present study was to explore the causes of success and failure among students preparing for the university entrance examination. Using the grounded theory method, the factors influencing success and failure in the examination were identified, and conceptual models of the factors associated with success and failure were developed.

The conceptual model of success in the university entrance examination consisted of six main categories: individual factors, family factors, school factors, university entrance examination preparation process factors, peer factors, and study-related factors. Individual factors included mental health, adaptability, personality, flexibility, self-efficacy, study skills, intelligence, metacognition, communication, motivation, compassion, resilience, emotional intelligence, values, spirituality, cognitive ability, self-awareness, career exploration and planning, goals, role models, academic fit, lifestyle, achievement motivation, interest, and attitudes. Family factors included compassion, parental relationships, parental support, parental expectations, family educational background, parenting style, parental involvement, family cohesion, family climate, and motivation. School factors included educational environment, compassion, educational facilities, school climate, teacher behavior, and teacher involvement. University entrance examination preparation process factors included the preparation process itself and the role of the counselor. Peer factors included peer climate, conformity, and peer support. Study-related factors included the study environment, family environment, supervision, and library environment.

The conceptual model of failure in the university entrance examination consisted of eight main categories: individual factors, family factors, school factors, university entrance examination preparation process factors, peer factors, study-related factors, and social factors. Individual factors included poor mental health, lifestyle, academic mismatch, attachment, lack of psychological capital, communication problems, lack of information, schema, media and virtual space, irrational beliefs, feedback, demotivation, academic decline, and poor comprehension of academic material. Family factors included family climate, lack of parental

involvement, parental expectations, poor parental mental health, parenting style, irrational beliefs, and limited communication with school. School factors included school climate, teachers' lack of information, teacher behavior, and lack of compassion. University entrance examination preparation process factors included the preparation process and the role of the counselor. Peer factors included peer climate, spending time with friends, and conformity. Study-related factors included library environment. Social factors mainly involved demotivation.

### *Mental Health*

In this study, mental health referred to the absence of excessive stress and anxiety, depression, obsessive tendencies, interpersonal problems, personality problems, and psychological disorders. According to the counselors' statements, one of the causes of failure in the university entrance examination was poor mental health. For example, one counselor noted that disorders such as bipolar disorder, depression, and obsessive tendencies were among the causes of failure. One student with a high rank stated that having a positive spirit and being free from stress was more important than anything else, while another student with a rank of 500 explained that because of intense stress, she had never been able to achieve her desired result and believed that she would have obtained a better outcome if she had not experienced so much anxiety. Likewise, one father stated that the most important reason for his daughter's success was the absence of anxiety and stress. In fact, what contributed to students' failure was the range of consequences arising from these difficulties, including perfectionism, sensitivity to others' judgments, demotivation, and slow reading. It may therefore be concluded that addressing such issues could represent an important step toward improving students' academic performance. This finding is consistent with previous research, including the study by (Torkashvand et al., 2022).

### *Self-Knowledge, Career Exploration, and Career Planning*

Self-knowledge was another factor that interviewees identified as highly important for success. In this study, self-knowledge referred to a relatively complete understanding of one's own characteristics, including

interests and preferences. Career exploration refers to the process through which individuals gather information about themselves and their environment in order to achieve growth and progress, while career planning refers to the extent to which individuals engage in developing their future career path and setting and pursuing occupational goals. Some unsuccessful students attributed their lack of success in the university entrance examination to insufficient awareness of their own interests and abilities. For example, one student explained that she had initially selected medicine as her major goal, but gradually realized that she did not really like medicine and was more interested in research-related work. Because her goal became more realistic, she was then able to study more effectively. Another student stated that she did not know what academic field to pursue at university, had no clear goal, and considered it a flaw in the educational system that she had reached adulthood without knowing what field to study or having occupational information. Another participant explained that he had first studied mathematics and physics and had been admitted to a university program in water engineering, but because he was not interested in it and the field had no promising job market, he withdrew and later took the humanities entrance examination.

Consistent with the students' statements that self-knowledge was one of the factors behind success in the examination, counselors also emphasized the role of self-knowledge in both success and failure. One counselor stated that success in the university entrance examination should be considered from childhood onward and that students who had developed self-awareness, career exploration, and career planning from an early age tended to achieve greater success and pass through the examination process more easily. In this study, most successful students had reached at least a relative level of self-knowledge, whereas unsuccessful students believed that even after twelve years of schooling, they still lacked sufficient awareness of their interests and abilities. They often attributed this to shortcomings on the part of teachers and the inadequacy of the educational system. It appears that self-knowledge is one of the fundamental and underlying factors affecting academic success and failure. Despite the importance of this category from the perspectives of parents, counselors, and students, previous studies have not strongly emphasized this issue. Accordingly, this

finding may be considered relatively new and practically useful, especially because self-knowledge is a process that can be enhanced through counseling and educational programs.

#### *Parental Support*

What emerged repeatedly from the statements of counselors, parents, and students was that parental relationships, family cohesion, and parental support for children were among the factors contributing to success in the university entrance examination. One counselor stated that the relationship between father and mother, and the extent to which they are intimate and kind, is influential. Another counselor emphasized that family support, both financial and emotional, together with a calm and tension-free family atmosphere, is highly important. Another interviewee noted that families who pay attention to their children and either provide no negative feedback or mainly offer positive feedback contribute to success. Similarly, some students stated that their fathers provided both financial support and self-confidence, while others emphasized that both parents had strongly supported them. These findings are consistent with the study by (Christenson et al., 1992; Hezarian, 2022).

#### *Parental Involvement*

In addition to student-related factors, parental involvement also played a major role in success. Parents of successful students reported extensive interaction with teachers and with their children's educational environment, whereas parents of unsuccessful students generally had limited communication with schools, and even when communication existed, it was often restricted to monthly or annual parent association meetings. One father of a successful student explained that he visited the school once a week, spoke with the teachers, and was always informed about his child's academic status. In contrast, the mother of a less successful student explained that she had no time to go to school because she had many tasks at home and the child's father was always at work. These findings are consistent with the results reported by (Alizadeh & Habibi, 2025; Petridou & Karagiorgi, 2018).

#### *Psychological Capital*

For achieving success, in addition to material and welfare resources, psychological capital, including self-efficacy, self-confidence, optimism, hope, and resilience, also appears to be highly important. These

characteristics were rarely found among unsuccessful students. According to unsuccessful interviewees, uncertainty regarding future employment, lack of job opportunities, and seeing unemployed educated individuals among relatives and acquaintances had reduced their optimism and hope and contributed to their demotivation. However, a point that attracted the researcher's attention was that although successful students had studied under the same general conditions as unsuccessful students, they did not refer to these discouraging issues and had continued their academic path with motivation. This suggests the presence of stronger psychological capital in successful students. These findings are consistent with the study by (Joensen, 2009; Pouratashi & Zamani, 2019).

#### *Achievement Motivation*

Motivation is the process that initiates, directs, and sustains goal-oriented behavior. Both successful and unsuccessful students were motivated, but the level and quality of their motivation differed because their goals were different. Both groups made efforts in order to be admitted to university, but the extent of their effort was proportional to their goals. For most successful students, the motivation for studying was academic advancement, achieving top ranks, and entering university. In contrast, the motivation of unsuccessful students was often to escape their current circumstances, avoid military service, or leave the country. One student with a rank of 500 explained that during the examination period, her only goal was passing the examination and that she did not think about anything else. In contrast, one student with a rank of 13000 stated that his only motivation for studying was to avoid military service. The point that both higher-ranked and lower-ranked students could be motivated, while differing considerably in effort because of differences in goals and in the contexts in which they lived, appears not to have been emphasized in previous studies and may therefore be considered a new finding.

#### *Parental Expectations*

The level of parental expectations can be regarded as one of the determining factors of either success or failure. According to all three groups of interviewees, if parental expectations are excessively high, children's stress increases; on the other hand, if parental expectations are too low, children may become indifferent toward education. This stress or indifference resulting from the level of parental expectations may

contribute to academic failure. However, when parental expectations are realistic and aligned with the child's abilities, interests, and preferences, they can facilitate success and progress. According to the parents of successful students, their children's education was highly important to them, but they maintained reasonable expectations. By contrast, parents of unsuccessful students appeared more indifferent toward their children's education, had lower expectations, and were often satisfied with relatively low rankings. In some cases, parents seemed to assess their child's academic position relative to their own background and family context. One counselor also emphasized that families for whom the process of education is more important than the final result tend to have more successful children. Interestingly, some parents whose children had ranks below 1000 still regarded them as unsuccessful, which may reflect their high expectations. Conversely, among the interviewees there were parents whose children had obtained ranks above 12000 and yet were considered successful by their parents, who expressed great happiness. This may reflect parents' limited awareness of the university environment and relatively low expectations. This category is consistent with previous studies on parental expectations, including (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010; Abaszadeh et al., 2022; Varzaneh et al., 2024).

#### *School Climate*

School climate refers to the overall conditions and atmosphere governing the school. In many schools, it is implicitly conveyed that students in mathematics and experimental sciences are of higher status, whereas students in the humanities are viewed differently. For many students, these distinctions were upsetting and distressing. A common assumption in Iranian society is that academically strong students enter mathematics and experimental sciences, whereas weaker students enter the humanities. This issue may lower the academic level of humanities students, so that a student can achieve good results with minimal study. In turn, this may create overconfidence, leading the student to make relatively little effort during the university entrance examination. One humanities student stated that he had been in a class where he could become the top student by studying only two hours and therefore did not study much for the examination, assuming that the same amount of study would be enough.

At the same time, however, such distinctions sometimes acted as a motivating force that pushed students to work harder and achieve success. One successful humanities student explained that the school principal paid more attention to mathematics and experimental science students and neglected humanities students, and that this motivated her to work harder in order to demonstrate that humanities students could also achieve strong ranks. In effect, the sense of humiliation she experienced as a result of these discriminatory attitudes became a motivation for greater effort. The university entrance examination preparation process includes all activities undertaken in order to succeed in the examination, such as participation in preparatory classes, trial tests, supplementary books, instructional media, and academic counseling. Most students in this study had participated in preparatory classes and trial examinations. Counselors believed that if these activities had appropriate content, they could be helpful, provided that they were not primarily serving the financial interests of institutions and individuals. In their view, the university entrance examination is no longer merely an admission test but has become a commercialized enterprise, and many individuals participate in these classes and tests largely because of trends and social pressure.

At the same time, some students who had achieved ranks below 1000 had not participated in any preparatory classes or trial tests. For example, one successful student with a rank of 100 stated that she had not attended any preparatory class and had simply studied and solved test questions at home. Another successful student with a rank of 123 similarly stated that he had never attended preparatory classes and did not believe in them. Interviewees also referred to the role of the counselor and believed that qualified counselors could contribute to students' success, whereas unqualified counselors could contribute to failure. Even skilled examination counselors do not recommend preparatory classes and trial tests to all students. As one counselor explained, preparatory classes depend on the student, because some students learn better in a classroom setting while others study better at home. These findings are consistent with [Tovar \(2015\)](#) regarding the university entrance examination preparation process. One of the findings that emerged from the researcher's observations was the existence of

both objective and subjective dimensions in the experience of success and failure. At the beginning of the study, it became evident that a student with a rank above 12000, who from the researcher's perspective would be considered unsuccessful, regarded himself as successful, and his parents also considered him successful. For this reason, the research question had to be framed in terms of whether students considered themselves successful or unsuccessful relative to the rank they had achieved. Among the interviewed students, one student with a rank of 123 viewed his success as limited, whereas another student with a rank of 13000 considered himself successful. Similarly, the parents of two students who had obtained ranks above 12000 but had been admitted to the University of Isfahan considered their children successful and expressed great happiness, and during the interviews they described the factors behind what they regarded as their children's success.

In qualitative research, the researcher is inevitably required to trust the interviewee. In fact, the degree of honesty in self-disclosure is outside the researcher's control and may influence the findings. One limitation of the present study was the inclusion of interviews with single-parent students. Another limitation was interviewing students whose parents did not have adequate mental health. In this study, interviews were conducted with students who had obtained ranks below 1000 without the use of special quotas, and the absence of interviews with students who had achieved ranks through quota-based admission was another limitation. A further limitation was that the study focused on students who had obtained regional ranks rather than national ranks. Given that the statistical population of this study consisted of all students who had participated in the national university entrance examination, it is recommended that similar research be conducted at the master's and doctoral levels. It is also recommended that teachers be included as interview participants in future studies. Future studies may conduct interviews separately by academic field. It is further suggested that interviews be conducted specifically with single-parent students.

It is recommended that preventive counseling services be provided for students in lower secondary school who are individually vulnerable to failure in the university entrance examination, possibly through early screening. It is also recommended that an educational

protocol on the factors of success and failure be developed for the Ministry of Education, school staff, parents, and counselors at earlier levels, with the aim of strengthening success-related factors and reducing failure-related factors. Finally, educating families of adolescents in upper secondary school, preferably beginning in the tenth grade, about the factors underlying success and failure may help create a more suitable context for the university entrance examination year.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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