Causes and Improvement Strategies of Students' "Pretending to Study" Phenomenon

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Abstract. Emphasizing the learning barriers and psychological transformations of students is imperative in educational research and practice. The high school phase holds paramount importance in the students' educational journey, as it is during this period that emotional and self-cognitive challenges stemming from academics and personal life can significantly impact academic performance. This paper delves into the phenomena of "pretending to study" among high school students, utilizing surveys involving teachers, students, and parents. The study sheds light on the widespread occurrence of this behavior, where students simulate efforts during self-study solely to meet the expectations of their teachers and parents. They perceive themselves as diligent workers without putting in actual effort, resulting in learning driven by self-pity, mindless studying with little yield, and dependency on others devoid of critical thinking. Attribution analysis implicates several factors contributing to this behavior, namely divergent self-perceptions, lack of determination, pressure to appease parents and teachers, fear, aversion to acknowledging personal limitations, and tendencies towards laziness. In conclusion, this study proposes recommendations for all stakeholders involved, including students, parents, and teachers, aimed at fostering improvement in this regard.

Keywords: high school, the pretend student, improvement strategies, causes and factors.

1. Introduction

From an educational and educational psychology standpoint, it is evident that the phenomenon of "pretending to study" transcends age and is not exclusive to adolescents. Extensive research has been conducted on this issue, spanning both adolescent and adult learning. The ongoing advancements in basic education reform have brought about various influences, resulting in significant transformations in high school education. The transition from traditional knowledge-centered teaching to a more comprehensive approach necessitates education that caters to students' individual talents. However, many educators tend to overlook the study of students, often relying on grades and apparent learning efforts in specific areas as the sole indicators of their potential. This approach may impede the accurate identification of genuine learning challenges. Adolescents not only contend with societal influences, family backgrounds, and the inherent stress of adolescence itself but also face significant academic pressure and expectations. Cognitive factors, values, learning abilities, motivations, and other variables often contribute to periods where students struggle to invest sufficient time and energy into studying, analyzing their knowledge, and fostering improvement. Currently, research in this domain remains relatively limited.

This study aims to explore the issues above by investigating the causes and improvement strategies of the "pretending to work hard" phenomenon among students. The findings will contribute insights to educational reforms that cater to student's diverse needs.

2. Literature Review

A pretend student engages in the act of feigning dedication to their studies on multiple levels. The phenomenon of students "pretending to study" has long garnered attention in academic circles, and the body of research on this subject continues to expand. Geng Xifeng et al conducted a quantitative study on the adverse learning behaviors exhibited by undergraduate students who mimic studying [1]. They observed significant variations in behaviors such as "inattentiveness," "lackadaisical conduct,"

and "inefficient methods." Particularly, "inefficient methods" and "inattentiveness" displayed notable disparities, whereas "lackadaisical conduct" showed no significant variance. Building on this quantitative approach, Zhang Yelin (2022) conducted a qualitative analysis to delve deeper into students who partake in the act of "pretending to work hard." Through this analysis, common manifestations were identified, including inadequate study planning, ambiguous learning objectives, low self-confidence and self-efficacy in learning, limited engagement in the classroom, weak self-control leading to subpar learning outcomes, waning interest, and negative attitudes towards learning, and poor study habits. These manifestations give rise to negative emotions that impede students' personal development [2].

In a study conducted by Han Ye involving high school students, questionnaires and interviews were utilized to shed light on the factors contributing to the emergence of "pretending to study." The findings unveiled several key elements, including a discrepancy between future aspirations and personal needs, a lack of a sense of accomplishment in learning, the gradual development of aversion and negative emotions towards studying, and a dearth of intrinsic motivation. The absence of clearly defined goals influences one's motivation to learn, while experiences of failure and incorrect attributions impact both confidence and motivation in the learning process. Among these factors, cognitive intrinsic motivation stands out as the most significant and enduring driving force for learning. Students' cognitive intrinsic motivation in a specific subject evolves through repeated instances of success and the fulfillment of their needs, shaping a robust learning motivation. Subsequently, successful learning experiences further augment cognitive intrinsic motivation and reinforce one's overall motivation to learn [3].

The key to addressing the issue of "pretending to study" lies in stimulating students' learning motivation. Huang Xiuxin conducted research on strategies that teachers can employ to achieve this goal. She suggests that teachers should guide students in developing cognitive frameworks for learning, establish customized and systematic learning objectives, and actively foster students' self-efficacy in learning. In addition, teachers should recognize the intrinsic connection between education and real-life experiences, incorporating real-world examples into their teaching and seamlessly integrating textbook knowledge[4]. It is vital for teachers to analyze students' existing knowledge, provide targeted guidance to address their weaknesses, and instill a sense of efficacy in their learning endeavors. Han Ye proposed that personalized education can cater to students' psychological needs, promote intrinsic learning motivation, and contribute to alleviating the phenomenon of "pretending to study." When students perceive that their needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy are acknowledged and respected in educational interactions, positive motivational outcomes are more likely to emerge [3].

Despite the extensive research conducted on the subject of "pretending to study," there remains a dearth of in-depth case studies. While exploring the general behaviors associated with students who engage in this phenomenon contributes to our understanding of the obstacles they face in their learning journey, conducting comprehensive investigations that focus on specific students, teachers, and parents can provide even deeper insights into the underlying causes. By delving into individual cases, a more nuanced understanding of the issue can be attained, leading to more practical and effective strategies for improvement. Such thorough analyses have the potential to enrich our comprehension of the phenomenon and enhance the viability of proposed strategies for addressing it.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Questions

Considering the critical role that the high school stage plays in shaping students' academic pursuits and career paths, it is crucial to effectively navigate the interplay between learning objectives, study engagement, autonomy, and external motivation. Failure to manage these factors appropriately can result in a lack of enthusiasm for learning and superficial engagement. Neglecting these considerations may leave students ill-prepared to meet the challenges of accelerated learning,

consequently impacting their academic performance and leading to unfavorable outcomes. In light of these concerns, the present study aims to address the following research questions:

1) Universality of the "pretending to study" phenomenon: Investigate the prevalence of the "pretending to study" phenomenon among high school students. The "pretending to study" phenomenon is widespread in high school, showing diverse images, yet students are consciously aware of such behaviors.

2) Underlying causes of the "pretending to study" phenomenon: Analyze the causal factors from the perspectives of students, educators, and parents. This analysis encompasses individual attributes of students (such as personal learning enthusiasm, abilities, stress resilience, cognitive learning processes, etc.), the societal milieu, a plethora of external influences introduced by parents and teachers, and the intricate interplay among these factors.

3) Recommendations for facilitating the "pretending to study" phenomenon: Propose tailored suggestions directed towards students, parents, and educators, respectively, to furnish insightful directions for establishing comprehensive educational measures within school settings.

3.2. Study Participants

For this study, a total of 60 second-year high school students and their respective headteachers from a selected high school in Tianjin were identified as the primary participants. Among them, there were 18 male students and 42 female students.

To gain insights into the influence of parental factors on students, two parents were selected as additional subjects based on information provided by the homeroom teacher regarding two specific students. Table 1 provides an overview of the basic information regarding the homeroom teacher, student representatives, and parents involved in the study.

The chosen high school holds significant importance at the district level in Tianjin and holds a moderate ranking within the city. Although the school's reputation is acknowledged, students face challenges in terms of inadequate learning motivation and poor study habits. Furthermore, the school exhibits a low rate of graduates being admitted to top-tier universities. Consequently, these issues make this school an appropriate representative example to illustrate the prevalence of the "pretending to work hard" phenomenon among students in moderately-ranked schools in Tianjin.

Table 1. Basic Information of the Headteacher, Student Representatives, and Parents

code	role	basic information
Tw	teacher	experienced teacher, 15 years as headteacher, class ranks high within the grade.
SS	student	strong specialization in subjects, diligence in studies, minimal family pressure, sensitive and fragile, relatively poor academic performance, low stability
SZ	student	excellent in studies, minimal family pressure, academic stress, high proactive learning ability, clear goals, strong self-discipline
PS	parent	concerned about child, positive family atmosphere, not overly demanding of child's studies
PZ	parent	sets high expectations for the child, a positive family atmosphere

3.3. Research Methods

Building upon previous research, this study devised a questionnaire to investigate students' learning situations, structured as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Questionnaire Structure for Investigating Students' Learning Situations

primary dimensions	secondary Dimensions
basic information	gender, grade, ranking, age, etc.
learning engagement and self-efficacy	time spent on homework, classroom focus, preferred subjects, learning
attitude, self-awareness in learning	learning interests, study methods, use of error notebooks, perception of current learning tasks
participation in extracurricular tutoring	necessity of extracurricular tutoring, comparison with in-class learning, interest in extracurricular tutoring, frequency, time
self-perception of learning	attribution for subpar exam performance, reasons for grade decline, primary factors affecting academic performance, personal learning weaknesses, main sources of pressure, personal shortcomings

4. "Pretending to Study" Phenomenon Analysis

4.1. Universality of "Pretending to Study": Based on Survey Questionnaire Results

Within the group of surveyed high school sophomores, there is a notable disparity in the gender distribution, with a higher representation of female students compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, an analysis of academic performance distribution reveals that 23.33% of students can be classified as high achievers, 40.00% as average performers, and 36.67% as low achievers. These findings underline the fact that a majority of students in this study demonstrate lower levels of academic achievement.

4.1.1. Learning Engagement and Self-Efficacy

The survey results indicate that 30% of students demonstrate active engagement in independent learning without external supervision, while a larger proportion of students require guidance to foster autonomous learning skills. However, it is important to note that the situation of these students is not overwhelmingly negative. The following observations shed light on this matter:

1) 73.33% of students exhibit an interest in the school curriculum;

2) 80% of students occasionally struggle to keep up with teacher instruction; 26.67% of students perceive current learning tasks as relatively undemanding; 33.33% of students feel inadequate for the tasks at hand; 40% of students experience a neutral disposition;

3) 80% of students maintain a moderate level of focus during lessons; 63.33% of students experience difficulty concentrating when uninterested in the subject matter; 23.33% of students find their attention wavering even when they have mastered the content; 55% of students struggle to maintain focus when grappling with challenging content; 30% of students lose focus when dissatisfied with the teaching methodology;

4) An astonishing 68.33% of students occasionally consult answer keys while completing routine assignments.

4.1.2. Participation in Extracurricular Tutoring

Based on the findings derived from the survey, it emerges that 50% of students do not partake in extracurricular tutoring. In terms of their perception of the importance of such tutoring, 56.67% of the surveyed students consider it to be of great significance. Notably, a unidirectional analysis of variance (ANOVA) examination revealed that students who achieve high academic results display a stronger inclination to acknowledge the value of tutoring (mean M=1.714, standard deviation 0.4688). Conversely, students with lower academic performance are less likely to recognize the necessity of tutoring (mean M=1.273, standard deviation 0.3558). The difference between the endorsements of tutoring significance by high-achieving and lower-achieving students is statistically significant ($p=0.009<0.01$).

4.1.3. Learning Efficiency and Focus

1) A notable 63.33% of students exhibit a highly positive attitude toward learning;

2) In the investigation of students' preferred learning styles, it was found that 80% of students exhibit a strong reliance on teachers, while 20% primarily engage in self-directed learning, displaying a weaker dependence on instructors;

7) An impressive majority of students, amounting to 56.67%, recognize the potential of classroom interactions between teachers and students in igniting their interest in the process of learning. Furthermore, 31.67% of students express their belief in the efficacy of enhancing existing teaching methodologies to stimulate their enthusiasm. Additionally, a significant portion of students, comprising 55%, firmly believe that active participation in extracurricular practical activities holds the power to ignite their passion for learning.

4.1.4. Self-Perception of Learning

8) When faced with unsatisfactory examination results, a notable portion of students, amounting to 33.33%, encounter emotions of disappointment and a sense of fear arising from potential criticism by both their parents and teachers. Meanwhile, 36.67% of students experience feelings of self-blame, prompting introspection regarding their own mistakes. On the other hand, 40% of students exhibit a resilient mindset by embracing failure, motivating themselves, and inspiring personal growth. Regrettably, 16.67% of students adopt an indifferent perspective, displaying a lack of desire for change;

9) An overwhelming 83.33% of students perceive themselves as lacking sufficient effort, identifying poor study habits as the most prominent factor leading to a decline in their grades;

10) 33.33% of students consider learning methods as the foremost factor influencing their academic performance; 36.67% attribute it to emotional state; 6.67% attribute it to the teaching proficiency of instructors; 23.33% attribute it to the learning environment;

11) A significant majority of students, constituting 55%, identify self-imposed expectations as the primary source of their stress. In contrast, 43.33% of students openly acknowledge their aspirations and actively strive towards achieving their goals. However, a considerable 40% of students continue to grapple with uncertainty, grappling with the question of what endeavors hold true meaning and how to navigate them effectively. Interestingly, a significant 75% of students recognize the imperative nature of elevating their focus on learning. Moreover, 38.33% of students believe that there is room for improvement in utilizing classroom time for studying, aspiring to optimize their academic productivity. Additionally, 30% of students express a need for more comprehensive and detailed study notes to facilitate their learning process. Furthermore, an overwhelming 61.67% of students deem it crucial to establish robust study habits as a foundation for their academic success.

4.2. Understanding the Causes of "Pretending to Study": Based on Teacher-Student Interviews

4.2.1. Problematic Students in the Eyes of Homeroom Teachers

The survey centered around the phenomenon of "pretending to study" among students and aimed to uncover the underlying reasons behind this behavior. Interviews were conducted with Tw, the homeroom teacher, who carefully observed a distinct dichotomy in students' attitudes toward learning within her class. Among the students, there were those who exhibited introverted personalities but displayed remarkable proactivity in their studies. This group demonstrated clear and well-defined learning goals and diligently formulated plans to achieve them. On the other hand, there existed another cohort of students who seemed to lack initiative and enthusiasm when it came to learning. Teacher W noted the significance of encouraging students who put in genuine effort despite facing unsatisfactory results. According to her, these students possessed evident ideals and goals; their study methods merely required adjustment and improvement. By providing support and guidance, Teacher W believed it was possible to help these students refine their approach to studying and unlock their full potential.

Upon being questioned about the prevalence of "pretending to study" behavior in her class, Teacher Tw acknowledged its existence and shed light on three primary reasons underlying this phenomenon. Firstly, some students engaged in such behavior with the purpose of presenting a positive image to their homeroom teacher, thereby facilitating explanations to their parents. It seemed to be a strategic approach to shaping a favorable perception of their academic diligence. Secondly, these students harbored a sense of complacency or overconfidence, believing that their effortless success in middle school would naturally carry them through high school without significant effort on their part. This perception stemmed from a certain reliance on luck or external factors, rather than recognizing the need for consistent dedication and hard work. Lastly, inadequate self-discipline hindered their focus, leading to distractions and lack of concentration. These factors contributed to the prevalence of "pretending to study" behavior among many students.

Teacher Tw held lofty standards for student excellence and placed less emphasis on academic performance alone. She strongly believed in nurturing the right mindset and approaching challenges with optimism as essential pillars for success in high school. This holistic approach aimed to prevent students from experiencing diminished study efficiency caused by overwhelming pressure, thus averting the need for "pretending to study" without tangible academic improvements. Thanks to Teacher Tw's effective teaching methods, her class consistently ranked among the top positions in their grade, securing an impressive second place. She attributed this achievement to the positive attitudes cultivated among her students and the lower academic stress they experienced. During parent-teacher conferences, Teacher Tw actively reminded parents to avoid imposing excessive pressure on their children and instead offered valuable guidance on fostering beneficial learning habits and well-rounded life skills.

Teacher Tw shared her perspective on students involved in "pretending to study," acknowledging their initial interest in learning. However, she emphasized that without perseverance and dedication, they would deceive themselves and fail to make any substantial progress. Overcoming the trap of "pretending to study" was crucial for enhancing both academic performance and efficiency.

4.2.2. Self-Perception of Labeled Students

The interviews uncovered instances of "pretending to study" behavior in student Ss, who encountered emotional hurdles within the school setting. These challenges prompted discussions about her dissatisfaction with the overall school environment. Student Ss held the belief that the teachers and administration displayed irresponsibility and lacked genuine concern for her emotional well-being and academic progress. Despite the possibility of future changes within the school, she remained pessimistic about its efficacy, feeling powerless to enact any meaningful change. Consequently, this situation caused significant distress. While her family provided a supportive and nurturing atmosphere outside of school, she continued to experience unresponsiveness within the educational environment, resulting in feelings of frustration.

Student Ss encountered difficulties in achieving satisfactory grades but remained driven by her aspiration to succeed in the high school entrance exam. It became apparent that her engagement in "pretending to study" behavior stemmed from underlying emotional struggles, which had been alluded to in earlier conversations. These emotional turbulences frequently distracted her and proved to be a hindrance to maintaining a focused mindset for studying. Surprisingly, her parents seemed oblivious to her emotional state, assuming she was composed and unaffected by worries. These misperceptions impacted her self-assurance, leading to self-doubt. She felt compelled to avoid placing undue stress upon herself, yet also recognized that this approach was unlikely to lead to any improvement. She regarded her efforts as mere "pretending to study," as her emotional turmoil and superficial completion of tasks provided temporary relief from anxiety. Despite her grades failing to improve, she found a fleeting sense of solace in this approach.

Student Ss acknowledged the absence of effective study techniques catered to her individual needs. With determination, she aspired to enhance her efforts and self-discipline in order to stabilize her emotions and overcome the challenge of "pretending to study."

On the other hand, student Sz thrived academically, displaying a positive attitude within the school environment and fostering harmonious relationships with her peers. Her parents respected her decisions and engaged in patient communication while supporting her endeavors. Student Sz exhibited remarkable independence, tackling challenges autonomously and avoiding excessive reliance on her parents. She demonstrated exceptional foresight, preemptively averting mistakes or addressing their underlying causes. While occasional weariness from prolonged learning made her feel like she was "pretending to study," she believed in the significance of genuine knowledge acquisition. She adhered to the notion that "reading elevates one," embracing a mindset that cherished intellectual growth. Her parents held high expectations for her, contingent upon her successful resolution of the "pretending to study" predicament. By virtue of her genuine passion for learning and disciplined study habits, student Sz positioned herself for excellence in college admissions.

The cases of student Ss and student Sz illustrate contrasting attitudes towards learning and approaches to familial support. Student Ss recognized the need to identify effective study strategies and enhance her self-discipline while also yearning for stronger emotional support and recognition of her progress from her parents. On the other hand, student Sz, having embraced self-monitoring and benefited from her family's encouragement, exemplified the profound influence these factors can have on academic achievements and emotional well-being.

4.3. Exploring Labeled Students' Parents

Subsequent interviews were conducted with the parents of student Ss and student Sz, shedding light on their parenting styles and perspectives. The parents of student Ss, referred to as Ps, deviated from the conventional "Chinese parenting" style and instead employed a more permissive approach. They respected their child's autonomy and refrained from imposing rigid academic expectations. When queried about their perception of their child's emotional fluctuations, Ps acknowledged limited awareness, particularly during the adolescent phase. However, they acknowledged the importance of enhancing communication to steer their child away from making misguided choices.

In stark contrast, the parents of student Sz, referred to as Pz, upheld lofty standards for academic excellence and had well-defined ambitions for their child's future. Moreover, they displayed profound concern for student Sz's mental well-being and endeavored to establish rigorous expectations without jeopardizing her psychological equilibrium. Recognizing her competitive disposition and lofty self-imposed standards, they witnessed her enthusiastic and diligent approach to learning. Moving forward, Pz expressed their intention to closely monitor their child's well-being, striving to strike a delicate balance between fostering open communication and upholding demanding benchmarks without subjecting her to overwhelming pressure. This holistic approach aimed to guide their child's development more effectively.

5. Attribution Analysis of the Phenomenon of "Pretending to Study"

Several key factors emerged after surveying students exhibiting "pretending to study" behavior. The following analysis attributes the underlying factors influencing students' "pretending to study" behavior:

5.1. Discrepancy between Self-Perception and Reality

Numerous students partake in the practice of "ostensible studying," stemming from the pervasive belief that they must project an image of diligence in the presence of their educators and parents. This enduring mindset breeds anxiety when their actions fail to align with their subconscious self-image. To avert this incongruity, they strive to sustain an unwavering facade of effort. Nevertheless, as the arduous pursuit becomes increasingly demanding, many opt for a strategy that simulates industry without necessitating exhaustive exertion. Over time, this pattern evolves into the phenomenon of "pretending to study."

5.2. Lack of Firm Willpower

This scenario arises from a deficiency in the inclination to invest substantial effort while harboring aspirations for exceptional outcomes. Individuals endowed with resolute determination diligently execute their actions, methodically advancing step by step. Conversely, those lacking such steadfastness succumb to diverse temptations, impeding their ability to sustain protracted endeavors. According to the survey findings, a staggering 40% of students experience confusion and uncertainty when it comes to translating intentions into concrete actions, while 46.67% exhibit a dearth of autonomy and self-awareness.

5.3. Pretending to Put in Effort to Impress Teachers and Parents

In order to meet the expectations, set forth by their educators and parents, students occasionally assume an illusion of effort. Despite the potential for lackluster outcomes, parents and teachers often perceive this outward display as genuine exertion and abstain from criticism. Hence, "pretending to study" assumes the role of a protective barrier shielded from reproach. The survey findings reveal that approximately 33.33% of students harbor apprehension regarding criticism from their parents and teachers.

5.4. Fear of Failure and Reluctance to Accept Inadequacy

This group of individuals is plagued by an apprehension of failure and endeavors to conceal their shortcomings. Genuine aspirations for success elude them, and consequently, they refrain from sincere exertion, opting instead to evade the prospect of failure. "Pretending to study" serves as a tool to project an image of competence. It is noteworthy that a substantial proportion of students, approximately 83.33%, acknowledge their inadequate effort, attributing their declining academic performance to deficient study habits.

5.5. Sense of Learning Weariness

Under the weight of prolonged academic pressures, there exists a notable depletion of energy. According to Chinese scholars Yang Lixian and Lian Rong, this phenomenon is aptly termed as "learning weariness," wherein students experience mental and physical exhaustion stemming from a dearth of interest and motivation in their studies. Within this weary state, coupled with mounting external expectations, the inclination to engage in the act of "pretending to study" becomes apparent[5]. The survey findings unveil that approximately 63.33% of students grapple with a lack of interest in their subjects, while 33.33% harbor feelings of inadequate learning aptitude.

6. Recommendations for Addressing "Pretending to Study"

6.1. Recommendations for Students

The following recommendations are derived from attribution analysis to address the phenomenon of "pretending to study":

1) Develop clear, daily study plans with precise goals.
2) Create manageable plans that avoid complexity and excessive tolerance for mistakes, which can lead to procrastination.
3) Incorporate a rewards mechanism for achieving goals and establish a long-term plan to stay motivated.
4) Emphasize meaningful completion rather than merely finishing tasks, focusing on comprehension and application.
5) Cultivate self-confidence by acknowledging capabilities and avoiding self-doubt. Set achievable goals to reduce anxiety and procrastination.
6) Improve study methods by practicing summarization, reflection, and regular review.
7) Align learning direction with personal interests and prioritize effort for one's own sake.

8) Recognize that time isn't equivalent to effort; find efficient study methods that suit individual learning styles.

9) Prioritize mental well-being to sustain motivation.

6.2. Recommendations for Parents

Through attribution analysis of students engaged in "pretending to study", this study offers the following suggestions to parents on how to facilitate improvements:

1) Enhance personal qualities through self-reflection and gather experiences of dealing with different stages of child development.

2) Foster a supportive home environment emphasizing independent thinking and subjective initiative, creating a nurturing and pressure-free atmosphere.

3) Establish the right educational mindset, avoiding unnecessary comparisons and demonstrating patience and determination when facing challenges.

4) Improve communication with children by using a collaborative approach instead of lecturing.

6.3. Recommendations for Teachers

Based on an attribution analysis of students engaging in "pretending to study", this study offers the following suggestions for educators to enhance their support for such students:

1) Tailor expectations to individual student needs, recognizing their diverse learning styles. Avoid applying a single framework to all students.

2) Elevate self-awareness and ethical standards to set a positive example.

3) Update teaching methodologies, enhancing scientific literacy to cultivate students' overall quality.

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