UNDERACHIEVING LEARNERS: CAN THEY LEARN AT ALL?

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Abstract

Some students at the secondary and high school levels in western countries drop out having been labelled underachievers, even though teachers sometimes fail to establish whether such students underachieve in a particular subject or in all subjects. However, opinions are divided among educationists regarding the definition and causes of underachievement. This paper addresses some contemporary issues associated with underachievement. The rationale for the study is to identify the groups of learners referred to as underachievers and to find out if their condition can be improved with the help of teachers, psychologists and parents. Categorizing underachievers into different types has had an impact in proffering solutions, especially in the case of so-called gifted underachievers a phrase which otherwise appears to be an "oxymoron or educational enigma" (Barbara 2005). The question of whether or not underachieving learners can still learn is answered in the affirmative after consulting the literature on counselling and motivation.

Keywords: *underachievers, students, learning, motivation, counselling.*

1. Introduction

There has been a general concern in recent times in the educational arena regarding the academic performance of underachieving students. Barbara (2005) concluded that the processes of defining underachievement, identifying gifted underachieving students, explaining underachievement, and suggesting appropriate interventions remain controversial issues. This paper seeks to find out if underachieving students can learn, and if not what can be done to improve their situation.

Another purpose of this review is to determine possible causes of underachievement among students; this is underpinned by the assumption that a combination of factors both in the home and at school can cause underachievement (Sousa 2002). Aside from school or family influence, Gallagher (1991) contended that personal/psychological factors could also cause underachievement in students. The present work therefore focuses on the students themselves, bearing in mind the fact that a student's cognitive functioning will to a large extent affect performance at school.

The subsequent discussion is divided into four sections to give an understanding of what really constitutes underachievement. Section 2 explains the rationale for the review, defines underachievement, and also identifies different types of underachievers and their characteristics. Section 3 then addresses the possible causes of underachievement.

While section 4 provide suggestions for intervention strategies to help underachieving students.

In light of this, a growing body of research has revealed that the condition of underachieving students could be improved using counselling principles. The argument in favour of this submission is that affective concerns are related to academic performance, habits and coping strategies, which may also be involved in academic resilience (Santiago-Rivera *et al*. 1995). Since the role of motivation and counselling are considered important in helping underachieving learners, section 4 also emphasises motivation and counselling approaches and lastly conclusions were draw in section 5.

2. Rationale for the Review

In spite of much research into underachievement, it appears that not much has been done to provide lasting solutions to the problem of underachievement at school, especially in secondary and high schools. Also many studies have centred on gifted underachievers at the expense of considering other areas such as gender and culture (Muir-Broaddus 1995, Peterson and Colangelo 1996, Barbara 2005).

The present paper identifies the group of learners referred to as underachievers in schools; defines and identifies the causes of underachievement, its types and their characteristics, and suggests possible ways in which academic success can be enhanced.

The review also draws on previous research work on this subject conducted in various cultural contexts in order to achieve a holistic view of underachievement

2.1 Who are Underachievers at School?

One would have thought that, with the growing body of literature and increasing research on student performance and achievement, an agreed definition of underachievement would be easy to find. Surprisingly, however, educationalists have found it difficult to proffer a universal definition of underachievement. This problem of a unified definition has persisted over the years. Klinge *et al*. (1997) posited that defining the characteristics of the child who is labelled as an underachiever has been a difficult task for psychologists and educators for a considerable time. Barbara (2005) contends that despite all the assessment tools available to today's educators and mountains of existing research, a straightforward definition of underachievement is not available.

Divergences of opinion among commentators on what constitutes underachievement appear to be one of the major reasons for disagreement, and different researchers may use different measures to determine who is an underachiever. For example, Gallagher (1985) pointed out the danger of using intelligence tests for some gifted students who are labelled underachievers because of poor academic performance. This is because less is known about their intellectual functioning.

Reis and McCoach (2002) suggest that the impact of culture on academic performance should not be ignored when considering underachievement in schools, especially for foreigners. They maintain that these students face unique barriers to achievement, such as language problems. For example, minority students are frequently underrepresented in programmes for gifted and talented students (Barbara

2005). Furthermore, people within particular sub-cultures may define achievement in different ways from that of the dominant culture. A research carried out with underachieving students in China, it was revealed that underachievement involves a marked discrepancy between expected and actual performance (Kit-Ling Lau and Chan 2001).

Nevertheless, promising definitions have contributed much in addressing the issue of underachievement. For example, Whitmore (1980) and Colangelo (1982) believe that many definitions of underachievement underscore the gap between potential (ability) and performance (achievement). In other words, the inability to maximise potentials have been a common denominator in these definitions. However, while this position may offer a general definition of underachievement, the dynamics of ability and performance must also come to play.

Ability and performance are not static phenomena but are in constant flux, and therefore change over time. Student performance varies at different times, and could be better depending on the degree of preparation before examinations. Yet the same student with the same amount of preparation may not perform as well as at other times. The failure to perform to the optimum could be attributed to factors external to the student's intellectual and cognitive ability. Such factors could include emotional problems (Sontag *et al*. 1958) or behavioural/maturational issues (DeHirsch *et al*. 1996).

Sousa (2002) observes that underachievement is behaviour, and not an attitude or set of work habits. Behaviour change over time and can be more directly modified as opposed to attitude. Research conducted with students in Nigeria which aimed at

determining the causes of underachievement found that a major cause was behaviour problems other than deficiencies in ability or intellectual capability. However, underachievement is a pattern as complicated as the children to whom this label is applied, and some researchers believe that a more accurate way to define it is to consider its various components (Delisle and Berger 1990).

The following components are useful, according to Delisle and Berg: Underachievement is content and situation specific; those who may not be successful at school, for example, are often successful in outside activities such as sports, music or after-school jobs. Also, labelling a student as an underachiever ignores the positive outcome of those areas in which the student does succeed; it therefore makes more sense to label the area of underachievement, not the student. For example, a student may be underachieving in mathematics or science. Underachievement is tied to the self–concept which can become a self- fulfilling prophecy. If students see themselves as failures, they may eventually place self-imposed limits on what is possible.

For students in this category, good grades are dismissed as accidents or luck but poor grades serve to reinforce a negative self-concept. From the literature, it is evident that a universally acceptable definition of underachievement has not been possible. However, most researchers agree that discrepancies between ability and actual performance, behavioural disruptiveness, and neurological/cognitive factors may have much to say in explaining underachievement (Bluer 1987; Delisle and Berger 1990; Sousa 2002).

In answer to the question of who are underachievers at school, it can be deduced that underachievers include those students:

1. who do not perform according to expectations in a particular subject area.

2. who as a result of behaviour do not show interest/do well in their studies.

3. who do not perform well in a specific subject area.

4. who do have the necessary intellectual ability but still underachieve.

5. who are limited by culture, language and gender from doing well academically at school

2.2 Types of Underachievement and their Characteristics

A comprehensive model has not yet been devised that can organise educationalists' current understanding of underachievement (Lunch Pad 2006). Nevertheless, it is generally observed that the quest for improving the condition of underachievers and students with "special educational needs" SEN has placed considerable demands on teachers. Educationalists and psychologists acknowledge the fact that separating underachieving students and those with special educational needs (SEN) into different categories could enable in-depth knowledge and understanding of their circumstances (Smith 2005).

Mandel and Marcus (1988) identified six major types of underachievers, described as follows:

1. Coasting underachievers are believed to emerge at about 9-10 years. They exhibit general contentment with themselves and life, procrastinate at home and school, give up easily, show little concern about low grades, make sincere-sounding statements about their intentions, are easily distracted from school work and seem unconcerned about the future.

2. Anxious underachievers may have problems at any age and tend to show performance deficit of 10-20%. They tend to be tense and unable to relax, avoid school, excessively worry and are unrealistic about their competence and mistakes, need constant reassurance and approval, and may even become school-phobic. Marcus (2007) noted that worried or anxious underachievers are insecure, have high levels of self doubt and experience high levels of tension.

3. Defiant underachievers are more often boys than girls before adolescence. They lose their temper easily, argue with authority figures and defy them, deliberately annoy others and blame others for their own actions or mistakes.

4. Wheeler-dealer underachievers may be impulsive, charming or intimidating, manipulative and self-seeking and intent on instant gratification (Mandel and Marcus 1988). They tend to live for the moment and for immediate rewards, lie, cheat or steal, manipulate others, get into the same kind of trouble over and over again, and may even talk about becoming rich and famous.

5. Identity search underachievers are so wrapped up in trying to work out who they are that they become distracted from their work (Mandel and Marcus 1988). They possess the characteristics of intense self-absorption, struggling with the question, "Who am I"? They search for the meaning of life, are intense about everything, opinionated, and determined to be independent. They take responsibility for their own actions, behaviour and decisions and experiment with opinions, value systems, and beliefs.

6. Sad or depressed underachievers are depressed, have low self-esteem, find it difficult to make decisions and lack the energy needed to concentrate on school work (Mandel and Marcus 1988). They appear apathetic, have poor appetites or overeat,

sleep too much or have trouble sleeping, are low in energy and feel tired, have trouble concentrating and may feel hopeless and pessimistic.

Marcus' (2007) typology of underachievers is slightly different from that of Mandel and Marcus (1988) though they share certain characteristics. Marcus' types of underachiever include those who are worried and anxious; acting and manipulative; easygoing; lazy and unmotivated; oppositional; and introspective.

An appreciable amount of the literature on underachievement has highlighted a type of underachievement which has posed particular problem for educationalists. The gifted underachiever is something of a mystery; it is difficult to explain how gifted students can underachieve academically. Clark (2002) defined gifted students as those who have developed high levels of intelligence and consistently perform at these high levels. Barbara (2005) observed that gifted underachievement, at first glance, seems like an oxymoron. How can a gifted student also be an underachiever?

Attempts to identify the causes of gifted underachievement have, however, met with limited success (Howley and Pendarvis 1986). Peterson and Colangelo (1996) noted that much has been written during the past decades about underachievement among students with high ability, and underachievement in gifted students has perplexed educationalists and parents. The gifted underachiever truly is an educational enigma, and this situation has elicited professional concern in the educational field, considering the fact that highly able students perform poorly academically when they possess the potential for achieving high scores.

Weiss (1972), Peterson and Colangelo (1996), and Barbara (2005) all posited that gender and culture differences affect underachievement. According to a study by

Weiss (1972), approximately 25% of females who are above-average in academic performance may be considered underachievers as compared to 50% of above-average males. A more recent study by Silverman (1993) discovered that female students are more at risk than male students of avoiding their talents as they strive to maintain a balance between inter-personal relationship and academic performance.

Butler-Por (1987) observed that more attention is given to female than male students in helping them to realize their intellectual potential due to competition between physical appearance and intellectual functioning. The fact that physical appearance and global self-worth components of self-esteem decline more in female than male students after age 12, sometimes affect academic or career choices and aspirations in female students (Bucscher and Higham 1989).

Research conducted by Jacob (1991) found that the interaction between parents' gender stereotypes and children's self-perception influenced performance. Bonbon (1992) conducted research in which it was discovered that gender influenced the choices made in mathematics.

In the sphere of culture, Reis and McCoach (2000) stated that little research has focussed specially on culturally diverse underachievers. In their research they discovered that students from minority ethnic backgrounds faced unique barriers to achievement. For example, language was discovered to have played an adverse effect on gifted Latino students' achievement, while being proficient in English generally meant greater success in school for Spanish-speaking students. However, according to Reis (1998), there could be a different value system within the Hispanic American community, which could be of greater impact especially for female students.

Interestingly, no matter what type of underachievement and their characteristics, educationalists and other concerned bodies have made concerted efforts to proffer solutions.

3. Causes of underachievement

A review of the literature has revealed considerable divergences of opinion on what causes underachievement in students. Sousa (2003) observed that a combination of factors both in the home and at school can cause underachievement. On the basis of current research in cognitive development and reading comprehension, two important reasons for students' underachievement in any academic area can be identified: (1) their inadequate understanding of how to select, adapt, and monitor strategies for learning; and (2) their insufficient motivation to apply actively the understanding they have (Ryan 1989).

Ryan stressed that reading plays an important role in achievement. His research indicated that for the attainment of any reading or writing goal, an individual has four types of cognitive capabilities available for use: 1. basic abilities 2. acquired knowledge, 3. strategies and 4. met cognition. Ryan further observed that 75% of underachieving pupils in primary schools had reading problems among other things, whereas only 35% of the other pupils had reading problem. The former group underachieved in all subjects.

Adequate attention should be given to reading and writing when the issue of underachievement arises, especially in countries where English is a second language. If pupils do not learn how to read effectively early on in school, they may have difficulty at later stages and may withdraw from learning rather than risk being

exposed to shame. Neurolearning (2005) found that visual memory problems are woefully under recognized as a source of school underachievement. The study explained that teachers take visual memory activities for granted.

Others have cited a lack of motivation amongst students in secondary, primary and higher education as one of the causes of underachievement (Gallagher 1991, Reis and McCoach, 2000, Sousa 2002). These authors further argued that lack of motivation provided by either teachers or parents could have a negative impact on children's performance.

For example, Whitmore and Rand (2000) observed that many gifted underachieving students need motivation from their teachers because they have learning styles incompatible with prevailing instructional methods. Another review by Rutter (1974) stated that there is never a unitary cause of underachievement. Instead he believed that some causes are attributed to complex circumstances which cannot be scientifically or easily explained, for example, emotional disorder. There is usually interplay of personality and social factors in this regard. Research by Mroczek and Little (2006) on personality studies contend that the self-concept is learned through the child's environment, both at home and at school. Negative self concepts can cause underachievement when parents do not acknowledge their children's abilities or fail to support them. A teacher's responses and feedback given to students also have the capability to shape their perceptions of themselves (MS 2002).

This paper has looked at the causes of underachievement and discovered that culture and gender are important factors to be considered when discussing the causes of underachievement in students. Furthermore, a study of underachievement in urban

schools in the United States argued that there may be regional or sub-cultural differences but that factors associated with the home and school are always important in underachievement in students (Smith 2005).

It can, therefore, be deduced that the following factors can cause underachievement in school children:

1. lack of motivation

2. parental/home influence

3. lack of nurturing of intellectual potential.

4. conflict of values

5. disabilities/poor health condition.

6. life experiences of specific groups of pupils; for example, resulting from brain damage/cerebral dysfunction or neurological impairment.

7. inability to recruit and also retain highly qualified personnel in schools.

Despite this complexity, it is interesting to note that there have also been some advances in proffering solutions to this social pathology.

4. The Way Forward for Underachievers: Counselling and Motivational Approaches.

Notwithstanding what has been written about the causes, types and characteristics of underachievement, this review will not be complete if possible

solutions for underachievement in students were not included. Some literature offers various intervention programmes or strategies designed to help underachievers to learn. From the literature, it seems that there are no unified intervention programmes for underachievers; rather there are several different approaches (Barbara 2005). Most existing intervention programmes centre around counselling and motivation. It is also clear that some programmes work while others do not. Fehrenbach (1993) contends that educational policies and the difficulty in getting schools to implement those policies is one of the reasons affecting the success of such interventions/policies.

However, Dowdall and Colangleo (1982) and Butler-Por (1987) suggested two different types of intervention, using counselling and instructional materials, which they believed to offer rich possibilities in changing personality and behaviours. For example, instead of forcing gifted underachievers to be more successful, counselling interventions can help them to make decisions on goals and to unlearn habits that have been disruptive to learning.

While there is debate amongst researchers regarding the usefulness of counselling interventions, proponents of this type of intervention still abound. Bleuer (1987) found that teachers' and counsellors' descriptions of underachievers and their behaviours suggest that they conduct a kind of cost -benefit analysis. It is evident that the costs of achieving includes alienation from friends who are non-achievers, while the benefits may include impressing friends, gaining the teacher's and parents' approval and achieving higher grade points. Moreover, underachievement usually involves frustration and may culminate in alienation from significant persons in their lives and general low self-esteem. Based on the above, it can be clearly seen that counselling and motivation should be useful in helping underachieving students.

Fine and Pitts (1980) devised some useful guidelines for planning and implementing successful intervention programmes:

1. initially develop a structure to support the child.

2. issues, expectations, and intervention plans need to be clearly outlined.

3. appoint one person to be in charge of the intervention plan.

4. involve the family in a close working relationship with the school.

5. group meetings should parallel family interactions.

6. parents and teachers should establish a strong parental posture to learning.

7. use follow-up conferences with the same people to maintain accountability.

8. expect and confront sabotage.

Successful intervention programmes do not let the child be in control. After all, underachieving children have shown their inability to work in their own best interest. However, through successful intervention, over time the child can be invited to be more active as problems and behavioural issues are resolved (Barbara 2005).

It can be observed from the aforementioned that interventions for underachieving students unequivocally place emphasis on counselling and motivation. Unfortunately, there is no mention of the particular approach to counselling that is most suitable, for example person-centred or cognitive behaviour therapy. However, this does not suggest that the interventions used do not work or are wrong.

With its emphasis on unconditional positive regard towards clients, the student-centred counselling approach seems more promising in improving the condition of underachievers. Within the context of the student-centred approach, relationships are a key issue in learning (Rogers 1961). Underachieving students need

someone to value them and show interest in them, and this will mean getting closer to them individually or in a group.

Underachieving students are aware of the label attached to them and the effects of labelling on personality are well known. Delisle and Berger (1990) contended that labelling a student as an underachiever ignores the positive outcomes of those areas in which the students does succeed. Rogers (1961) maintained that every individual has the potential for doing well if favourable conditions are provided. Teachers can make use of this approach in the following ways:

1. teachers should act as facilitators whose duty is to create an environment that is conducive for learning and engagement.

2. teachers should not put up a professional or personal façade when dealing with underachieving students.

3. teachers also need to empathize with the students.

Rogers (1961) also encouraged teachers to engage their students with task. Tasks can be enriched to increase the interest and engagement of students, providing an opportunity for them to have a sense of choice and ownership of activities that provoke curiosity and the personalization of learning (Blumenfeld 1992).

It is understandable that different interventions have been applied, and there is hope for underachieving students through these interventions.

However, it requires the concerted efforts of the stakeholders involved with underachieving learners: the students, teachers, parents, peer-group, and counsellors.

5. Conclusion

This review has attempted to address the issue of underachievement in schools, especially at the secondary level. The lack of generally accepted definitions and agreed causes of underachievement was found to be a long standing problem among educationalists.

The gifted underachiever was identified as one of the types of underachiever that has attracted greater attention in recent time. The available literature has provided insights into the problem and revealed promising intervention strategies for the remediation of the situation, suggesting that underachieving learners can still learn if provided with the appropriate help.

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