

# ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT- A SOCIAL CHALLENGE

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**Abstract :** The issue of academic underachievement is one of great concern for all educationists and parents. Underachievers can be found in every grade, from Kindergarten to Graduation. Underachievement can deprive the underachiever of the joy of living a fuller, happier life through optimizing his/her potential. It can impact higher education and professional careers. It affects the growth and development of the individual and consequently the progress of the nation. Underachievement could also be a manifestation of maladjustment. Hence teachers and counsellors need to play a key role in taking care of the mental health among children and the youth.

**Key Words:** Underachievers, teachers, maladjustment, causes, characteristics and strategies for motivation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Educational Institutions are under tremendous pressure to measure up, and be compared on performance indicators. So, underachievement of students is a huge challenge for teachers and parents, because of its great impact on studies in higher education and professional careers. According to Dr. C. S. Manna, Director General, Central Statistics Office (CSO), youth is the most important segment of the population whose human resource potential reaches its peak during this period. He said that when they are properly nourished, they can grow like a huge redwood tree but if not controlled or neglected, they can erupt like a volcano. Hence, no country can afford to neglect its youth.

In 2020 India's total youth population is expected to be 34.33% (National Statistical Commission, Govt. of India, 2017). Lagging behind in academic achievement is a serious loss to students, their families and to the nation. It will lead individuals to self-undervaluation and result in unhappiness, frustration and revolt. According to Kapri (2017), underachievement, is a psychological concept, signifying any student who has not made the most of his or her abilities and refers to a loss of potential man-power.

The percentage of underachieving students varies from 14.55% to 30.37%, depending on the statistical method that is employed (Veas, Gilar, Castejón, & Miñano, 2016). There are numerous reasons why people fail to achieve what they are capable of. Social-emotional competence and social support have strong influences on academic success during the critical period of academic skills acquisition (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Usually they are identified by the difference between their academic performance scores and their ability scores. However, some seemingly insignificant ones even go unnoticed in the hustle and bustle of the teacher's many responsibilities. Research findings suggest that school psychologists and others should address social-emotional competencies and classroom climate while designing interventions to improve achievement of disadvantaged students (op. cit.).

## II. THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Underachievers can be found in every grade, from kindergarten to graduate level, in both sexes, across ethnic and socioeconomic groups, and in every occupation (Karaduman, 2013). Since underachievement is a behaviour it can be modified. Therefore, it is wise to label the behaviour that the student displays and address it rather than label a student as an underachiever. Underachievement robs the student of his/her sense of fulfilment, self-worth and a promise of a bright future.

Considering the high percentage of underachieving students and the dilemma of teachers and parents who have to deal with them, this paper seeks to emphasize the need to identify underachievers and provide them with appropriate cognitive, emotional and social support systems. Contented youth make happy families, build healthy societies and a prosperous nation.

## III. WHO IS AN UNDERACHEIVER?

There is no clearly defined meaning of the term 'underachiever' (Veas, Gilar, Miñano, & Castejón, 2016), due to conceptual problems mainly related to the discrepancy between achievement and some index of the learner's ability. Psychologists often use this term for a student whose academic performance scores are significantly lower than those scored on the standardized intelligence and aptitude tests. Hence, 'underachiever' or a latent achiever is generally one who performs below one's potential in any field. It could also be based on 'consistent failure to perform up to reasonable expectations, depending on the innate abilities of the student' (Parker, 1988). Until the 1980s, most psychologists and researchers held on to the unitary model of mental ability i.e. the ability to reason, problem solve, decide, learn and act successfully in the pursuit of one's valued goals. Only a few like Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget conceptualized human intelligence differently and proposed separate developmental theories of cognition and reasoning in the 1970s.

According to Delisle (2018), underachievement is more than merely getting lower grades than one is capable of. It is indeed a complex issue that involves personal interpretation and nuance because every so-called underachiever is good at some things that neither get recognized nor acknowledged as important. They may be doing poorly in regular school classes, but excel in the projects they enjoy doing. In fact, according to Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983), the conventional notion of intelligence, based on I.Q. testing, is far too limited. He proposed eight different intelligences to account for a broader range of human potential in children and adults. Instead of only valuing the linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence, i.e. the highly articulate or logical people of our culture, Gardner says we should give equal attention to those who show giftedness in other intelligences e.g. the artists, architects, musicians, naturalists, designers, dancers, therapists, entrepreneurs, and others who enrich the world in which we live. Unfortunately, many children who have these gifts don't receive much reinforcement in school, on the contrary, their unique ways of thinking and learning get them labelled as 'learning disabled,' or 'ADD' (Attention Deficit Disorder), or simply underachievers.

Some of the famous underachievers like Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Steven Spielberg, Walt Disney and Stephen King were considered as failures by the system.

- Charles Darwin's life was once considered a major failure by even his own father.
- Albert Einstein could not speak fluently until the age of nine. His rebellious nature resulted in his expulsion from school. He failed the entrance test to the Swiss Federal Polytechnic School in Zurich and nearly dropped out of college studies. At the time of his father's death, he considered his son to be a major failure. This left young Einstein completely heartbroken.
- Steven Spielberg, one of the most influential filmmakers and the genius behind 'Jaws' and 'E.T', had poor grades in high school and was rejected from the University of Southern California three times. Spielberg has directed over 51 films and has won three Oscars.
- Walt Disney creator of 'Mickey Mouse' dropped out of school, failed in an attempt to join the army, went bankrupt due to his inability to run a successful business and was fired from a Missouri newspaper for 'not being creative enough.'
- Stephen King, an American author of horror, supernatural fiction, suspense, and fantasy novels, was a paranoid, troubled child, raised in poverty and tormented by nightmares. Addiction to drugs and alcohol were his mechanisms to cope with unhappiness. His books have sold more than 350 million copies, many of which have been adapted into feature films, miniseries, television series, and comic books.

#### IV. CAUSES OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT

The factors affecting academic underachievement can be divided into mainly two categories: personal and environmental factors. The personal factors include physical, intellectual or emotional factors, whereas environmental factors are related to the school or family (Chere & Hlalele, 2014). The reasons why learners fail to meet the expected levels of performance are numerous and differential e.g.

- Health problems and physical disabilities.
- Lack of organizational skills.
- Learning styles that conflict with teaching styles.
- Unaddressed learning disabilities that disturb the learning process.
- Boredom and lack of interest in the type of work assigned.
- Feeling of inferiority, perfectionism and self-criticism. Goals set either too high or too low.
- Fear of failure. Inability to perform according to the set criteria for tests and classwork.
- A competitive social climate that tends to alienate nonconformists.
- Inflexible and rigid classroom climate. An inadequate curriculum lays emphasis mostly on textbook guides, work books, and worksheets, with less opportunities for inquiry, experimentation, or exploration.
- Family background. Lack of parental support, lack of appreciation or value for academics, over empowerment (eldest/only child, single parent household) become setbacks for achievement. Extreme praise can result in obligation to perform beyond one's capacity.
- Maladjustment and absence of skills to cope with inner personal struggles, unhealthy neighbourhoods and unhealthy family relationships.
- Peer pressure. Pressure not to achieve due to misplaced interests of peers who are not inclined to learning.

The environmental factors are often the decisive factors resulting in positive or negative outcomes. Some negative experiences can have alarming consequences, such as, suicides and substance abuse. Elias & Haynes, 2008, cite Bronfenbrenner, (1979); Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, (2007) to state that children's school outcomes are very strongly affected by their family life, the neighbourhoods in which they live, the schools they attend, and the resources that are available to them personally and through the school. They cite the findings of numerous studies (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994; Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996; Spencer, 2005; Tolan, Guerra, & Montaini-Klov Dahl., 1997; Wilson, 1996) to emphasize the fact that, 'the harsh realities of living in the inner-city present challenges for many children born and raised there'. Therefore, citing several other studies, (Clark, 1991; Estell, Cairns, Farms, & Cairns, 2002; Luthar, 1995; Ogbu, 1991; Reynolds, 1998, 1999), they strongly assert the fact that discussions about the education process or evaluations of programs that address educational needs must consider these realities when studying children from high-poverty urban settings.

Students in these settings are not only disadvantaged by unimaginative curricula, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure and facilities, but also have very few teachers who are motivated to teach and believe in them. Elias & Haynes (2008), cite Attar et al. (1994), to emphasize that these children grow up experiencing notorious neighbourhoods, characterized by increasing poverty, unemployment, under employment, limited resources, substandard housing, and high crime rates. They cite Gonzales et al., (1996); Halpern, (1990); Tolan et al.,

(1997) & Weinstein, (2002) to reiterate that environmental risk factors have a high probability of later resulting in stressor-filled psychological environments and the development of problem behaviours in children. Reporting the findings of Haggerty et al., (1994); Hoff & Mitchell, (2006); NCES, (2002); Pogrow, (2006); and Reynolds, (1999), they indicate that children who attend school in low-income areas, in general, consistently show lowest academic achievement and poorest development of social skills.

Some 'underachievers' recount how school experiences contributed to their so-called underachievement. They complained about teachers' lack of respect for each individual. They detested the competitive social climate that respected and rewarded only those achievers who sought to conform to the set standards especially in tests and classroom work, but penalized the non-conformists - clearly indicating the 'failure syndrome'. They resented the rigidity and inflexibility of the teachers who disallowed variation in: student performance, curriculum choices, deadlines, individual interests, and sequences of learning experiences. Their teachers made all the decisions, and their dictates could not be challenged. They felt stressed at being compelled to meet the absolute standards of evaluation set by the teachers or districts. They felt that undue attention was given to classroom work consisting mostly of textbook guides, workbooks, and 'worksheets,' rather than to the interests and abilities of students, or opportunity for inquiry, experimentation or exploration (Parker, 1988).

Chere & Hlalele (2014), are convinced that the issue of academic underachievement is one of great concern, especially because it is a problem prevailing across all ability levels including gifted learners. However, Delisle (2018), says that we cannot clump all underachievers into one big pool of disappointing school performers because in some instances, the underachievement is temporary as the school takes on less importance when other aspects of their lives are causing personal turmoil. All the same underachievers need to be identified and helped.

## V. IDENTIFICATION OF UNDERACHIEVERS

According to Parker (1988), underachievers can be identified based on the following:

- Poor performance in school assignments, in spite of high scores in achievement and aptitude tests.
- Poor performance in school assignments and achievement tests, but high scores in aptitude tests.
- Poor performance in school assignments as well as poor scores in both the tests.
- Neglect of school work due to time spent in pursuing outside interests.
- Ability to grasp concepts orally, but failure in practical execution.
- Very narrow interests.

Underachievers who belong to the last two categories are usually not noticed by teachers nor parents. On the whole, there are some common characteristics that set them all apart from their performing peers hence there are good chances that if identified they could be helped and supported (Chere & Hlalele, 2014).

## VI. CHARACTERISTICS OF UNDERACHIEVERS

Underachievement is a stress indicator associated with physical problems, emotional discomfort and environmental factors. Some of the characteristics which may be seen in underachievers according to Parker (1988), Chere & Hlalele, (2014) and Karaduman (2013) are as follows:

### Personality Characteristics

These include:

- Lack of self-esteem. They have a low self-concept, low self-confidence, feel inferior to their peers and lack faith in their own ability. Some even turn 'class clowns' to compensate for their lack of self-confidence.
- Over anxiety about handling or completing tasks satisfactorily, feeling incapable, unproductive and dissatisfied with themselves.
- Apprehension about the ability to plan, organize and work toward a desired goal.
- Procrastination and lack of perseverance.
- Aggressive behavior. They may be hostile, resentful or touchy and often self-protective.
- Less resilience and more dependence. Their locus of control is external. They put the blame on external factors and take no responsibility for their life. They are pessimistic and let others control them.
- Social orientation with more interests outside.
- Lack of goal-directed behaviour. Failure to set realistic goals for themselves and engagement in purposeless learning.
- Differential thinking skills/styles such as: a) convergent thinking b) low performance on sequential tasks due to poor memorization c) slow on insight and critical ability i.e. unable to understand relationships or make connections between new knowledge and previous knowledge d) use maladaptive strategies e.g.
  - poor control of emotions, poor self-regulation strategies, low tolerance for frustration, lack of perseverance, lack of self-control
  - poor coping skills that reduce short-term stress, but inhibit long term success
  - use defense mechanisms to cope with reality and maintain self-image, to relieve anxiety and emotional conflicts, to handle anxiety generated by failure. They may deny having academic problems, create reasons for their failure, blame teachers or displace their anxiety on other learners through aggressive behaviour.

### Internal Mediators

- Fear of failure. Fear of criticism can lead to avoidance of challenging tasks.
- Fear of success. Adolescents sometimes fear that their achievement will be envied or resented by their peers. Peer acceptance seems more important than doing well in studies.
- Social withdrawal. They either avoid situations that arouse emotions or keep their emotions out of awareness of others, leading to feelings of alienation, hopelessness and pessimism.
- Dislike for school. This is due to some emotional difficulties or behavioural problems.
- Greater frequency of headaches, gastrointestinal problems, moist palms, and over-perspiration.

- Depression. Inability to concentrate, negative thinking and low energy levels.
- Possible anxiety and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) symptoms. Anxiety is characterized by fear or apprehension.

In spite of the many attributes that characterise underachievers, some are still 'invisible' due to their quiet and seemingly insignificant presence. They neither ask questions, nor cause any trouble, hence, often go unnoticed and are 'lost' in the midst of the teacher's daily share of workload and activities. These then slide even farther behind their classmates, and can eventually give up in discouragement. Therefore, Parker (1988) advises teachers not to depend on tests and classroom assignments alone to identify underachievers but observe each student carefully, their interests and needs, their learning styles, their personal stories and use professional judgment.

## VII. ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT AS MANIFESTATION OF DEEPER MALADJUSTMENT

The problem of underachievement need not always be purely academic but a manifestation of a deeper maladjustment problem that needs attention. According to WHO report, around 800,000 people commit suicide every year in the world. This is despite the fact that suicide prevention is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. In 2016, suicide was the second leading cause of death in the age group of 15-29 years, claiming 200,000 lives and is the third-most deadly causes of deaths for the 15-19 age group.

As per the WHO estimates of 2016, India has the highest suicide rate in the South-East Asian region with 16.3 suicides per 100,000 people, against the regional average of 13.2 and global average of 10.6. Sri Lanka stands second in the region with a suicide rate of 14.6 and Thailand third with 14.4. India also had the fourth-highest female suicide rate (14.5) in the world after Lesotho (32.6), Uganda (18.7) and Nigeria (17.1).

Chakravarthy, Shah & Lotfipour (2013), reveal that the existing studies show a high correlation between adolescent abuse and drug usage in adulthood. This indicates that many problem drug users start drugs at an early age. Alcohol and adolescent drug users manifest a high risk for school underachievement, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and depression.

## VIII. TYPES OF ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVERS

It is important to understand that underachievers cannot be categorised into any particular group due to the overlapping of characteristics shared by various types of underachievers. However, Rahal (2010); and Reis & McCoach (2000:161) and Marcus (2007) both cited by Chere & Hlalele (2014), have attempted to describe different types of underachievers. They are:

- *Dependent Conformer/The Stressed Learner/ Anxious Underachiever*  
These underachievers are anxious, perfectionists and worried about failure. This can disrupt social and occupational functioning or produce significant distress leading to absenteeism and complaints of physical ailments.
- *Dependent Conformer/The Complacent Learner/ Coasting Underachiever*  
These procrastinate and are easily distracted not only with schoolwork, but also with household chores and personal responsibilities. Thought of as lazy and lacking motivation, they puzzle teachers, counsellors, parents, and do not respond to the usual approaches such as counselling, rewards and punishments, medication or tutoring.
- *Dominant Non-conformer/Wheeler-dealer Underachiever*  
These appear very charming and friendly but are irresponsible, break rules and display improper behaviour. They are manipulative, insecure and have a poor self-concept. They are high on social life, but their friendships are unstable. They are impatient, put little effort in their school work. They lie, steal or cheat.
- *Dominant Non-conformer/ The Rebel/ Defiant Underachiever*  
Their defiant and angry attitude towards others and constant negativity towards authority figures is generalized to the school setting which results in academic underachievement.
- *Dominant Non-conformer/The Identity Search Underachiever*  
These are thoughtful, confused, and independent adolescents or early adults who try to figure out existential questions like, 'Who am I', 'Where am I going', and 'What does life mean'.
- *Dependent Non-conformer/The Sad or Depressed Underachiever*  
Depressed learners have a low self-concept and poor relationships with others. This affects their placement in the classroom or school resulting in underachievement. Depression can cause apathy, poor appetite or overeating, trouble sleeping or oversleeping, low energy levels, and feelings of hopelessness as well as pessimism.

## IX. STRATEGIES FOR MOTIVATING UNDERACHIEVERS

“The simple fact is that man is able...to lift himself by his own bootstraps. In achieving control of which he is part of, he may learn...to control himself.” (Skinner, 1961, p. 4) cited by Labrador (2004). Though the underachievers may have the power to change their lives they definitely need to be helped to optimise that potential. Some of the most important ways to motivate underachievers to change their behaviour according to Pagnani (2017), Parker (1988) and Kapri (2017) are by:

- *Enhancing their self-worth.*  
Every child needs to be respected, accepted and have a sense of belonging; hence, teacher and students should share feelings of mutual concern for one another. This is never easy. It requires teachers to first accept and respect themselves. Insecure teachers try to maintain superiority and rigid standards, which unfairly penalize students to fit into prescribed moulds. Such students often resort to criticism, threats, and ridicule. This only makes matters worse for underachievers by intensifying their feelings of inferiority and contributing to their lack of motivation.
- *Creating better school environment and facilities.*  
A healthy psycho-social climate in school will ensure quality and quantity of cognitive, emotional and social support for the child. A child's school experience exerts a potent influence on his developing personality patterns.
- *Teaching organizational skills.*  
Instead of simply advising students to "get organized", students should be taught how to organize themselves, their materials, and their time. Teachers must provide precise, detailed guidance, going through the processes several times until the student can apply the instructions without help.
- *Setting moderate standards of expectations in quality of course work.*  
Although mastery in coursework is necessary, extreme amounts of stress by impatient or unsympathetic teachers can make them give up. Students should be reassured that they can improve with help and determination.
- *Providing opportunities to succeed.*  
Their self-esteem can be improved by adjusting classwork to match their abilities and discover their learning styles. Teaching strategies must be adapted to suit their interests. Expecting identical work from every student on every occasion destroys motivation. Special students often require adaptations of the usual classwork.
- *Encouraging students' participation in the planning processes and helping them make choices within acceptable boundaries.*  
Working on an 'Achievement Plan,' will allow them to use methods that match their learning styles and also build confidence in their ability to succeed.
- *Signing the "Achievement Contract".*  
An agreement could be signed with the student to provide some allowance (e.g. independent study or educational film, etc.) in exchange for good grades in classroom assignment or good remarks from subject teachers.
- *Continuing to hold the student accountable for the contract.*  
Maintain high expectations and hold regular progress meetings with the student.
- *Re-evaluating the program periodically, making modifications as necessary.*
- *Meeting with parents to discuss the proposal.*  
Ask parents for help in reinforcing academic messages at home. Avoid blame games. Give assurance that the school hopes to work with them to correct this problem.

## X. CONCLUSION

Underachievement is a result of several factors working together against a child's capacity for achievement. Behaviour is modifiable and so a keen observation of the factors affecting each underachiever, could help in providing the right type of help and support. The Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) finds that the socio-emotional development of students is as important as mastery of school subjects. Striking a delicate balance between expressing confidence in the student's abilities and monitoring the results of their efforts, could help them overcome their maladjustment. Good teacher-student relations can affect students' attitudes towards learning. A generous measure of compassion and empathy are needed besides counselling, to stand up against hostile neighbourhoods, unsupportive families and paralyzing peer pressures. External factors such as the school environment, need to be conducive for learners to help them discover their giftedness and apply it. In fact, the challenge of education would be to break free from the measures of standard curricula performance, and move towards a complete paradigm shift, where other forms of intelligence find expression and are acknowledged beyond the stereotyped achievement tests as seen in the lives of some highly successful achievers. A whole new area of research could arise from this.

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