

MANAGING UNDERACHIEVERS IN CLASSROOMS: ROLE OF TEACHERS' ATTITUDE

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Abstract

Present study was an attempt to explore teachers' point of view regarding various difficulties faced by underachievers in regular classroom settings. 179 teachers from 15 urban private schools of Ludhiana City were randomly selected for the present study. The results of the study revealed that majority of the teachers perceived that individual differences amongst children do exist in learning of same concept. Many believed that underachievers as compared to achievers, take more time to understand basic concepts and don't focus on the main topic. Underachievers were considered different from the achievers in behaviour and performance. However, majority of the teachers believed that underachievers perform better in Art and craft activities, have leadership qualities and can socially adjust well. The overall picture depicts that to manage underachievers well in class, there is need to put more emphasis on teaching basic skills to these children and to involve them in extra curricular activities to enhance their self-esteem.

Introduction

Preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school teachers play a vital role in the development of children. What children learn and experience during their early years can shape their views of themselves and the world and can affect their later success or failure in school, work, and their personal lives. Teachers introduce children to mathematics, language, science, and social studies. Most elementary school teachers instruct one class of children in several subjects. In some schools, two or more teachers work as a team and are jointly responsible for a group of students in at least one subject. In other schools, a teacher may teach one special subject—usually music, art, reading, science, arithmetic, or physical education—to a number of classes. A small but growing number of teachers instruct multilevel classrooms, with students at several different learning levels. The impact of an Elementary school teacher during the early and formative years of a child's life is significant from both an intellectual and social development perspective. From impacting their self-image to affecting their success or failure in school or work to their personal lives, teachers play a critical role. Unfortunately, very few underachievers are identified at an early stage by the teachers. Instead of providing emotional and moral support to these children, teachers punish such children for better academic performance.

Learning difficulties among young children is considered as one of the most common reason for underachievement in studies. As per International surveys, approximately one in every seven people has a learning disability in western

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countries and a recent survey conducted in India shows one in ten people is having learning disability in India (Karanth and Rozario, 2003). Ramma and Gowramma (2002) in their study of dyscalculia among primary school children in India mentioned that 5.98 percent of children were suffering from dyscalculia and 51.27 percent of children had reading and writing problem. Like any other disability early identification and intervention help learning disabled children to lead a normal life. Over 30 years of research findings about learning disabilities and the affected students have shown that intervention using validated and best practices make a positive difference in their performance (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006; Swanson & Sachse-Lee 2000).

Gupta (2005) also viewed that by training a few younger teachers for early identification of such problems, we may be able to provide assistance to the professionals and hence, professionals can assist the teachers by spending minimum time in the areas where their expertise can't be substituted. A well trained teacher will have an eagle's eye to observe scientifically and objectively and will quickly identify the problem and the reason for underachievement, particularly, in case of hidden problems like problems related to reading-writing, hearing impairment, expressive language problem, low vision etc.

It is unfortunate that the condition of children who for any reason are not able to achieve well becomes more pathetic when teachers develop negative attitude towards them. Academic performance of children varies from child to child. Mendro (1998) also reported that there is strong connection between teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

If teacher are sensitive towards reasons of underachievement and are able to give little more consideration to such children, they can perform better in their studies. Thus, need was felt to understand attitude of teachers towards so called academically poor children or underachievers. It is well said that that if reasons for a particular problems are known, half of the problem is solved. Therefore, present study was an attempt to explore teachers' point of view regarding various difficulties faced by young children while studying, so that appropriate intervention strategies for children could be designed.

Selection of the sample

The present research study was carried out in 15 urban Private schools of Ludhiana City. 15 schools were finalized on the basis of availability of facilities and infrastructure, staff, number of sections and willingness to participate in the research project. Teachers who were teaching 3rd and 4th class students were randomly selected from each school.

Methodology

A Self- structured questionnaire to assess teachers' perception regarding underachievers of their respective class was prepared. Perception of teachers was studied to ascertain the criteria they adopt to identify such children and strategies they use to teach such children.

In most of the schools teachers teaching English language were also the class teachers. This ensured that they had close contact and knowledge of problems of their students. The selected teachers were asked about the problems they face in class and how they identify underachievers. They were asked about to whom they label under achiever and what common characteristics of these children were and so on. They were asked to list down the names and area of difficulty of each student. Most of the questions in the questionnaire were open ended and ample opportunity was provided to the teachers through these questions to express their views freely.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Teachers' perception regarding individual differences in learning among children (n=179)

Sr. No.	Response	Frequency	Percentage
1.	All learn at same pace	5	2.79
2.	Do not learn at same pace	174	97.21

Table 1 describes teachers' perception regarding individual differences in concept learning. Majority of the teachers (97.21%) perceived that all children in their class do not pick the concepts at the same time i.e. every child takes his own time to understand the concepts taught to them. They reported that some students need repetition and some need more time to understand the same concept. Only 2.79 per cent of the teachers perceived that all children in their classes pick the same concept at same pace. There was only one teacher who did not give answer to the question.

Table 2: Teachers' perception regarding percentage of intelligent children in their class

Sr.No.	Percentage of intelligent children	Perception of Teachers	
		Frequency	Percentage
1.	Less than 25	76	42.46
2.	25-50	42	23.46
3.	More than 50	61	34.08

Table 2 depicts that 42.46 per cent of the teachers perceived more than 25 percent students in their class as intelligent against 34.08 per cent of the teachers who perceived that more than 50 per cent of their class students were intelligent

Table 3: Common characteristics of under achievers as perceived by the teachers

Sr. No.	Characteristics of underachievers	Perception of teachers	
		Frequency	Percentage
1	Poor grasping power	106	59.21
2	Lack of attention	69	38.54
4	Poor Marks in class tests	40	22.34
5	Disability(Mental or Physical)	26	14.52
6.	Poor home environment	16	8.93

*Multiple Responses

Table 3 elucidates that 59.21 percent of the teachers perceived that children who lag behind academically in the class show poor grasping power i.e. they take time to understand basic concepts, they forget the learned concepts very frequently, followed by 38.54 per cent of the teachers who believed that lack of attention is the major characteristic of underachievers. However, getting poor marks in regular weakly/ class tests was perceived as the key characteristic by 22.34 per cent of the teachers. Characteristics like prevalence of any physical or mental disability and poor home environment were perceived as common characteristics of underachievers by 14.52 and 8.93 per cent of the teachers respectively.

Table 4: Differences between underachievers and intelligent students as perceived by the teachers* (n =179)

Sr. no.	Areas of difference	Perception of teachers	
		Frequency	Percentage
1.	Interest, concentration & attention	76	42.45
2.	Reading, writing & language problem	18	10.05
3.	I.Q. Level	15	8.37
4.	Home environment	26	14.52
5.	Interest and home environment	36	20.11
6.	Interest and language problems	9	5.03
7.	I.Q. and home environment	5	2.79

*Multiple Responses

It is depicted in Table 4 that 42.45 percent of the teachers perceived that underachievers as compared to their counterparts lack attention and interest in studies i.e. they don't focus on the topic as compare to the intelligent students. 20.11

per cent of the teachers perceived that lack of interest along with poor home environment is another area where academically poor differ from the intelligent ones. Children with academic skill disorders don't get favorable environment at home. Home environment itself is an important factor which affects the performance of underachievers different as perceived by 14.52 per cent of the teachers. 10 percent of the teachers also believed that slow reading & writing along with language problem is a common characteristic of underachievers. Most of them face problem in understanding what they are reading and writing. They are unable to understand and follow the instructions. Low IQ level was also perceived by 8.37 per cent of the teachers as an area that deteriorates the performance of underachievers indicating the fact that underachievers are perceived to have low I.Q. than their counterparts who are considered as intelligent.

Table 5: Teachers' perception regarding factors responsible for poor academic performance among children (n =179)

Sr. No.	Perceived factors	Perception of teachers	
		Frequency	Percentage
1.	Low I.Q. Level	54	30.17
2.	Home environment, lack of motivation/guidance from parents	39	21.79
3.	Heavy syllabus	39	21.79
4.	Lack of motivation, less understanding, behavioural problems and low IQ Level	31	21.2
5.	Lack of understanding and heavy syllabus	17	9.50
6.	Lack of understanding of basic concepts	15	8.38
7.	Behavioural problem	8	4.47
8	Behavioural problem and heavy syllabus	6	3.35

Table 5 indicates that 30.17 per cent of the teachers believed that low IQ level of the child is the most important factor responsible for poor performance in the class. Unsupportive home environment and lack of motivation and guidance by the parents was perceived as important factor responsible for underachievement by 21.79 per cent of the teachers. It was reported by the teachers that underachievers face discouragement, criticism and indifferent attitude of the parents that further lowers their self-esteem and confidence to perform better in studies. Similar percentage of teachers also felt that these students find it difficult to cope with heavy syllabus. Further, 21.2 percent of the teachers perceived that a child with poor academic performance usually have many factors that affect his performance like lack of motivation by parents, lack of basic understanding, behavioural problems, and low IQ level. All these factors directly or indirectly adversely influence a child's ability

to perform better. Behavioural problems among underachievers were perceived as responsible factor for poor academic performance by only 4.47 per cent of the teachers.

Table 6: Teachers' perception of areas where underachievers perform better than others (n =179)

Sr. No.	Areas	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Art and craft and leadership	78	43.58
2.	Co-curricular activities/sports	36	20.11
3.	Art & craft	19	10.61
4.	Co-curricular activities and computer	7	3.91
5.	Co-curricular activities and leadership qualities	6	3.35
6.	Leadership qualities	5	2.79
7.	Computer	4	2.23

Table 6 shows that 43.58 percent of the teachers believed that underachievers perform better in Art and craft activities and many have leadership qualities whereas 20.11 per cent believed that these students do well in sports and extra co-curricular activities of the school.

Table 7: Teachers' perception regarding areas of similarities & dissimilarities between underachievers and intelligent students (n =179)

Sr. No.	Teachers' perception	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Both are same	8	4.47
2.	Both are different	171	95.53
Areas of similarity (n=8)			
1.	Behaviour	8	100.00
2.	Performance	-	-
3.	Both	-	-
Areas of dissimilarity (n=171)			
1.	Academic Performance	68	39.77
2.	Academic Performance and behaviour	54	31.58
3.	Improvement in academic performance	32	18.71
4.	Family background and behaviour	17	4.09

Table-7 explain teachers' perception regarding areas of similarities & dissimilarities between underachievers and intelligent students. This table indicates that majority of the teachers (95.5%) perceived that underachievers are different in their behaviour and performance from the intelligent ones whereas, only 4.47 per cent of the teachers perceived both as similar in behaviour. The teachers who perceived that they are different, out of them 39.77 percent of them perceived them different in their performance whereas 31.58 per cent perceived them different in performance as well as in their behaviour. 18.71 per cent of the teachers also felt that underachievers show very slow or inconsistent improvement in their performance. Many of these children forget things very soon and if proper track is not kept they come down to their previous level and this frustrates the concerned teacher. Very few (4.09 %) teachers also reported that there is marked difference in the behaviour and family background of underachievers and intelligent ones.

Table 8: Teachers' perception regarding percent distribution of underachievers across various levels of Social adjustment

Sr. No.	Levels of social adjustment	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Well adjusted	126	70.39
2.	Maladjusted	48	26.82
3.	Can't say	5	2.79
Reasons for maladjustment (n=48)			
1.	Behaviour problem	39	81.25
2.	Poor home environment	9	18.75

Data in Table 8 reveals that majority of the teachers (70.39%) believed that underachievers can adjust very well in the society i.e. they can act as well adjusted social being, they can show good behaviour and follow social norms and values against 26.82 per cent of the teachers who perceived them as socially maladjusted. 5 teachers did not give any response. Poor behaviour and poor home environment were perceived as two major reasons for their maladjustment.

Salient Findings

- Majority of the teachers (97.21%) perceived that individual differences do exist in learning same concept.
- 42.46 per cent of the teachers perceived more than 25 percent students in their class as intelligent against 34.08 per cent of the teachers who perceived that more than 50 per cent of their class students were intelligent
- Almost half of the teachers believed that underachievers as compared to intelligent ones, take more time to understand basic concepts, don't focus on the topic and forget the learned concepts very frequently,
- Unsupportive home environment and lack of motivation and guidance by the parents, inability to cope with heavy syllabus, lack of basic understanding &

behavioural problems were reported as major reasons for underachievement among children.

- 43.58 percent of the teachers believed that underachievers perform better in Art and Craft activities and many have leadership qualities.
- Majority of the teachers (95.5%) perceived that underachievers are different in their behaviour and performance from the intelligent ones. Majority of the teachers (70.39%) believed that underachievers can adjust very well in the society
- Problems in reading and writing in the students of their respective class were perceived by only 3.35 percent of the teachers.

Conclusion

The assessment and management of underachievement in schools is a complex issue and need to be examined in the context of the school system and parental involvement. The acquisition of learning skills is a function of the child's potential, teaching strategies, attitude of parents and teachers and is mediated with various psycho-social factors. The management of problems of underachievers needs to be developmental and holistic in perspective. It is important to investigate how and why some students perform below average in schools. Teachers, being the prime educators should be given due freedom to participate in planning strategies for such children. It is also recommended that more and more orientation programmes should be initiated for in-service teachers focusing on different dimensions of identification and management of problems of underachievers.

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