

EXPANDING TEACHING POSSIBILITIES FRONTIER BY UNDERSTANDING YOUR UNDERACHIEVING LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

There have been always misconnections in various aspects between teachers and learners in the realm of education. As much as teachers, either accomplished or newly qualified, wish to provide a learning friendly ambience, they have been always challenged to strike a balance between demanding syllabi and limited total time available. Teachers tend to carry over their teaching habits when new terms start, regardless of challenges and conditions that arise over time. Unintentionally, more attention is channelled to successful students – “those whose temperaments and backgrounds make school their cup of tea” (Ciaccio, 2004, p.78). Underachieving learners who do inferior work at school is not fully attended to in the teaching and learning process. Nonetheless, it is estimated that 40 to 60 percent of students demonstrate the underachieving syndrome (Ciaccio, 2004).

This paper studies one of the nine types of academic underachievers that is, the struggling learners that are undertaking Australian-based Pre-University programmes. Primary qualitative data are gathered via interviews, aiming to explore learners’ self-perception, self-discipline and motivation levels to better know the common characteristics and how passive thoughts are formed along their learning journey. This initiative contributes to broadening teachers’ understanding about the presence of academic underachieving learners in classrooms and hence, adding clarity to teachers’ role in providing necessary attention as well as technical assistance to them.

The student voice research has the “power to unlock the shackles of habit that so often bind teachers to their familiar routines of practice and thought” (Flutter, 2007, p.352). With the knowledge of academic underachievement, more customised approaches such as motivating underachieving learners (Rahal, 2010), giving descriptive feedback (Brookhart, 2008), communicating high expectations (Ciaccio, 2004), and repackaging the subject contents (Ciaccio, 2004) can be catered for underachieving groups of students.

Keywords: Teaching habits, underachievement, struggling learners, student voice.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Underachievement is a discrepancy between one's intellectual ability and academic achievement (Rathvon, 1996). Underachieving learners perform less well than what is expected. Underachieving learners have attained an ambiguous status, despite the fact that a considerable percentage of them are learning in classrooms. Positioned between very high and very low performing learners, underachieving learners' needs and difficulties are usually not teachers' prime concern. In learning institutions, there is surely more than one type of underachiever. Heacox (1991) categorised academic underachievers into nine major profiles that is, the rebel, conformist, stressed learner, struggling learner, victim, distracted learner, bored learner, complacent learner and single-sided achiever. This paper focuses on the struggling learner profile. Struggling learners have intellectual potential but have underperformed due to their passive self-perception, loose self-discipline and lack of required learning and motivation skills. Their negative self-belief has been reinforced by external parties, teachers and peers in the schooling system over the years. Most of the time, they are identified by their teachers as learners who are not motivated to learn but consistently portray laziness, disinterest, complacency or distraction in their learning processes. Teachers' habitual teaching approaches to underachieving learners are likely to compound learners' academic difficulties.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodology is selected via conducting interview sessions with fifty-two students, from either the Australian Matriculation or the Monash University Foundation Year Programme. This allows face-to-face interactions and space to pursue in-depth conversation about participants' experiences. Australian-based Pre-University programmes are the targeted group due to the diversifying criteria and standards of the internal and external assessments, which are culturally different for many students who join after completing secondary level of the national Malaysian curriculum.

3.0 DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The study found that approximately 65% of interviewees demonstrate the underachievement syndrome and of all of them, about 80% are identified as struggling learners. Potential struggling learners are grouped according to the characteristics description by Heacox (1991). For a better understanding of struggling learners, interviewees are also assessed in terms of three aspects – self-perception, self-discipline and teacher as their motivator. The summary of the inputs from the interviews undertaken are presented in the four main breakdowns as below.

3.1 Characteristics

Struggling learners share six common characteristics as below. These characteristics are found comparable in general as described by Heacox.

- 1) Underachievement problems among struggling learners begin before the Pre-University level. Most of them begin to encounter academic difficulties at upper secondary education level. Struggling learners show either regressive (88% of them, from high to low) or constant (12% of them, constantly average) trend in their academic performance in major national examinations. They completed their primary school study with little effort and performed above average, but eventually find it challenging to cope with higher and demanding education levels.
- 2) Struggling learners' academic performance has been neither outstanding nor poor, but on average scoring range of 40-60%.
- 3) Struggling learners lack technical learning skills required for a higher level education such as time management, first-time instruction taking, work organisation, note taking, research and computing skills. Struggling learners tend to practise similar learning approaches which have been mastered at a very young age. However, these approaches are no longer appropriate at a higher education level.
- 4) Struggling learners lack self-discipline. Academic achievement is not their priority and they are attracted to situations that give comfort and warmth, as long as no potential failure is involved.
- 5) Struggling learners perceive they are unsuccessful. They empower negative thoughts, driving them to look below average in their potential capability. Over the years, they perform below average as they believe that they will never make any positive difference.
- 6) Struggling learners, from the outskirts or non-elite schools of Johor state, have relatively poorer English proficiency level. This leads to language barrier in terms of communication, writing and comprehension of abstract subject contents.

3.2 Self-Perception

Based on Table 1 below, it is obvious that struggling learners have poor evaluation of their own competencies. Some of them tend to be highly critical of themselves and they require themselves to be perfect. As a result, there shows a tendency to exaggerate the negative. They are unable to identify their exact strengths and weaknesses in academics studies. Moreover, struggling learners do not intend to seek help and advice from their parents.

Table 1: Summary of Struggling Learners' Self Perception

Intellectual Ability	Generally, struggling learners do not feel that they are very mentally able. They perceive themselves as mediocre students. They admire high performing students' achievement. Many of them conclude that they will never be as smart as their high performing peers. Some of them are motivated with the presence of high performing peers in their class. However, struggling learners are not inspired by peers' success, as they believe that they deserve to be unsuccessful.
Scholastic Competency	Generally, struggling learners do not have high confidence level that they can master their coursework given. Majority of them have trouble figuring out tasks given. They do not possess necessary skills to complete the written and verbal assessments either with individual effort or group work. They lack skills in terms of time management, first-time instruction taking, work organisation, note taking, research and computing skills.
Job Competency	Generally, struggling learners are not proud of the work they do and are not satisfied with the way they do their job if it is related to their academics.
Social Acceptance	Struggling learners are socially accepted by peers and confident that they possess sufficient social skills to make friends easily. The fulfilment of their social needs results in withdrawing their effort when facing barriers in academics. Struggling learners generally spent more time on social activities, approximately 60% of their total free time, out of class time.
Parents Relationship	Generally, Struggling learners get along well with parents and find it easy to act naturally around their parents. However, they choose not to share their personal thoughts including their academic deficits and struggles.

3.3 Self-Discipline

Struggling learners have no idea what to plan, why to plan and how to plan. Their plan is to have no plan, as they anticipate more failures.

Table 2: Summary of Struggling Learners' Self Discipline

Goal Setting	Generally, struggling learners do not set long term goals, cannot foresee any possibilities at any point of time beyond one year. They see no reason to improve their learning conditions. Some of them set short term goals i.e. what to be achieved in a semester. Eventually, they do not follow their plan, particularly when they do not perform as expected along the semester.
Study Schedule	Generally, over the time periods, as more failures are accumulated, struggling learners have decided not to plan their study as it has never been workable. Occasionally, they draft out a rough schedule in mind as the deadlines of assessments approach.

3.4. Teacher as Important Motivator

At Pre-University level, students register four to five subjects per year. Individual lecturer's effort does not make appreciable impact on struggling learners' negative self-perception, due to their past cumulated experiences with teachers at primary and secondary levels. The motivation from one or two Pre-University lecturers can only last for very short time, i.e. 1-2 weeks and is not helpful in their academic improvement across all subjects registered. Struggling learners need technical assistance and caring consistently from all their Pre-University lecturers. Pre-University lecturers can only make a difference in struggling learners with joint effort as a whole, to change their habit of thoughts from negative to positive.

Table 1: Summary of Teacher's Role as Struggling Learners' Motivator

Source of motivation	Generally, over the time periods, due to cumulated academic failures, struggling learners do not perceive teachers as an important source of motivation. They regard themselves as lazy, disinterest, disorganised and insignificant persons in the eyes of their teachers. This perception is developed via verbal feedback and apparent negative body language from their teachers. One of the factors causing less attention from their teachers is large class size. Struggling learners are neither very outstanding nor very slow learners, they stand in between the two extreme groups of learners and therefore are easily neglected. However, some of them do feel encouraged when move on to Pre-University study as the class size is significantly smaller compared to the class size in their secondary schools. With the range of lecturer and student ratio between 1:10 and 1:35, struggling learners are given relatively more attention in the learning process.
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4.0 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, teachers are recommended to incorporate a few effective interventions in teaching. These include how to motivate underachieving learners, give feedback, repackage their subject contents which enable visible connections, and communicate high expectations in the teaching and learning process. While doing so, the destructive and constructive teaching practices listed should be taken into consideration. Both destructive and constructive habits are summarised based on the inputs of interviews undertaken.

Ten destructive habits of teaching are:

- 1) Teachers assign tasks with all necessary information without having work "chunked" for struggling learners in completing their assignments.
- 2) Teachers give lengthy and wordy notes. Struggling learners cannot comprehend a big picture and re-organise information.
- 3) Teachers give feedback that reflects teachers' negative emotion about struggling learners. In contrast, teachers give positive response to high performing learners.
- 4) Teachers criticise struggling students' weaknesses openly in class.

- 5) Teachers implement classroom rules that teachers themselves do not follow. Struggling learners perceive these as bad examples to cultivate better self-discipline.
- 6) Teachers “read” from the source of information such as slides, notes and text books.
- 7) Teachers explain in ways that only successful students can comprehend and repeat explanations when struggling learners do not understand the subject contents.
- 8) Teachers deliver the lesson according to the learning pace of successful learners.
- 9) Teachers assume students have strong relevant prior knowledge about the topics taught.
- 10) Teachers are not sensitive enough to notice their struggling learners and do not recognise their effort.

Struggling learners appreciate the following teachers’ effort:

- 1) Teachers allocate extra time, catering for small group learning such as conducting enrichment classes in small groups, making full use of their consultation hours of at least 1 hour per subject per week. Personal contact or working in very small group provides opportunity to communicate better.
- 2) Teachers make good use of the social media such as Facebook, “what’s app group”, etc. to enhance their learning outside the classroom.
- 3) Teachers introduce learning skills such as mind mapping to enhance students’ learning.
- 4) Teachers are able to connect what they learn in class to the reality and show struggling learners a big picture of the subject contents.
- 5) Teachers are able to show clear linkages of information across different chapters.
- 6) Teachers encourage students with positive body language.
- 7) Teachers have effective classroom management that ensures a pleasant and friendly learning environment.
- 8) Teachers give descriptive feedback which contains learning opportunities.
- 9) Teachers recognise struggling learners by effort, and celebrate their little successes. For example, praise struggling learners promptly when students reflect very slight improvement in learning.
- 10) Teachers love their struggling students and communicate high expectations to them.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This study has explored more in-depth understandings about the underachieving learners in classrooms. With these understandings, teachers can make this as a starting point to always put forward momentum in redefining their teaching methodologies accordingly. It is also important that teachers to understand from students’ viewpoints that is, to avoid the ten destructive teaching habits and internalise the ten constructive teaching habits for more effective teaching and learning process.

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