

Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Achievement among Underachieving Students in A High School in Klang Valley: A Case Study

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Abstract

The topic of underachieving students in Malaysia is important because education plays a crucial role in creating knowledgeable and capable individuals who can contribute to their families and nation. Despite efforts by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to improve educational quality, particularly in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of Malaysian pupils who do badly in school remains a severe concern. Furthermore, there has been an increase in the number of students dropping out during the online learning period. This study is a qualitative case study that investigates the factors that contribute to poor academic achievement among underachieving students and explores strategies to address those factors. The study employed purposeful sampling and involved three students who were identified as underachievers, as well as two educators who taught these students. Semi-structured interviews with the participants were used to obtain data. According to the findings, factors that contribute to poor academic performance among underachieving students were lack of family or parental involvement, financial issues, students' motivation, teachers' role, students' absenteeism, learning facilities and syllabus insufficient teaching methodologies. Teachers, school administrators, curriculum designers, and developers will find these insights useful as they plan new teaching and learning strategies for their classrooms. Future studies should include parents, principals, government officials, NGOs, and others involved in the education of underachieving students.

Keywords: Poor Academic Achievement, Underachieving Students, Family Support, Motivation, Learning Strategies

Introduction

The purpose of education is to create knowledgeable and capable people who can think critically and behave morally to promote the welfare of their families and nation according to Malaysia's National Education Philosophy. Education is important for everyone to ensure they will be able to think critically and creatively in problem-solving and decision-making. The most important part of education is in career development and a promising future.

Every Malaysian kid has the legal right to receive a basic education under the 1996 Education Act, which aims to create knowledgeable and talented citizens. As a result, Malaysia will be able to position itself as an educational centre of excellence. There are numerous projects and initiatives available to Malaysian students during their 11 years of official education in both primary and secondary school. Despite the programmes and initiatives, there are students who performed low in academics, and this issue has become a major concern in the country. The underachieving students have been struggling in the learning process and in achieving the objectives and learning outcomes of the courses.

The underachieving students still struggled to meet the requirements in examinations and education and struggled to earn excellent scores. When classes moved to an online format and students started secondary schooling, the situation deteriorated due to an increase in the number of students quitting.

According to Ullah & Almani (2022), the following are the most crucial elements that significantly affect pupils' academic performance: inadequate teachers, for students, there is a lack of reading and teaching materials in the classroom, and the teachers are not trained, inadequate teaching conditions, poor school administration. Shahjaha, et al (2021) in his study figured out that poor academic performance during the summer semester final exam in 2016 was significantly influenced by the father's low education level, partial family cooperation, irregular class attendance, excessive time spent gossiping with friends, and excessive use of smartphones (time spent on social media).

Objective of This Study

This group of children continues to have difficulty studying in spite of the Ministry of Education, the school administration, and the instructors' efforts to assure the success and achievement of these underachieving students. So, the purpose of this study is to identify the contributing elements of these students' poor academic performance. This study also aims to analyse the present and potential instructional approaches used by teachers to help this particular set of students significantly enhance their academic performance.

Research Questions

The following research questions are addressed in the study:

1. What are the causes of poor academic achievement among underachieving students?
2. What are teachers' classroom strategies in managing underachieving students?

Literature Review

Poor academic achievement among underachieving students

Several studies have explored the perceptions of underachieving secondary school students towards self-learning. Underachieving secondary school students have a poor attitude towards learning and little faith in their capacity to learn on their own. They frequently lack motivation and do not recognize the benefit of self-learning. Highly motivated learners are likely to learn readily, and make any class fun to teach, while unmotivated learners may likely learn very little and generally make teaching painful and frustrating (Filgona et al., 2020). Binong (2020) in his study to 189 B.Tech students found that the results show how different factors affect performance to varying degrees, with student intellectual ability being the most important component.

Olufem et al (2013) in their studies to assess factors affecting students' academic performance in Colleges of Education in southwest, Nigeria concluded that factors related to

students, parents, schools, and teachers have a significant impact on students' academic achievement. The learning environment, including the physical space, classroom culture, and school policies, can also affect student achievement. For example, overcrowded classrooms or a lack of resources may negatively impact learning outcomes.

According to Ozcan (2021) in his study on factors affecting academic achievement from teachers' viewpoint found that the educational level of the family has an impact on children's academic achievement in terms of academic support, serving as a role model, care, intelligence, and motivation; the physical environment of the school has an impact on learning, motivation, and creativity. School Management's operations and attitudes have an impact on students' academic progress. In terms of motivation, social effects, and socioeconomic effects, the school environment has an impact on students' academic progress. Whether it comes to professionalism, serving as a role model, communication, attitude, motivation, and guidance, teachers have an impact on students' academic progress. According to Syaza and Norhasmah (2020), low household income is one of the major causes to students' poor academic performance. The inability to provide better education for deeper comprehension, as well as insufficient healthy food, which supplies essential energy for the brain to function efficiently, have been compromising factors in declining academic performance. The academic performance of children in B40 community schools is affected by various socio-economic challenges.

Teachers' Classroom Strategies in managing underachieving students

According to Zuraidah et.al (2019), teacher factors play a significant role in affecting students' academic progress since teachers support student learning. In line with McClelland's theory of the Motivation of Achievement, teachers should exhibit high levels of motivation and commitment to effectively educate children of varying academic abilities. To this end, teachers should be motivated to prioritize their teaching duties and avoid undue stress from non-teaching activities. Additionally, teachers must possess resilience and persistence to overcome the challenges inherent in teaching diverse groups of students. Within the classroom setting, it is imperative that teachers make a concerted effort to learn and commit to the memory of the names of their students. Such a practice not only facilitates better classroom management by enabling teachers to establish more personal connections with their students, but also demonstrates the teachers' genuine interest and concern for their students' well-being (Sueb, et.al., 2020)

Methodology

As this study aimed to investigate and elicit in-depth the factors that contribute to poor academic achievement among underachieving pupils, a qualitative case study research design was used. Yin (2017) defines case studies as a detailed investigation of a current phenomenon within its actual context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its setting are unclear. This design was utilised by the researchers in this study to collect thorough data on the factors that contribute to poor academic performance among underachieving pupils in a Malaysian high school, as well as to unearth new ideas and perspectives for solving the situation. The researchers discovered that engaging with the participants involved, including instructors and students, was the most successful way for gaining a deeper knowledge of their experiences, viewpoints, and concerns about the issue. This strategy not only allowed the researchers to collect rich and extensive data that would

not have been available otherwise, but it also provided insights for devising effective interventions to improve the learning outcomes of underachieving students.

The School Context

The study was carried out at an urban national secondary school in Selangor. This school has approximately 70 teachers and 650 students. Each grade has a classroom consisting of 30 students. The vast majority of parents are from B40 families.

Respondents of the Study

Purposive sampling was employed to select the teachers and students who would participate in the study. The study included two teachers and three pupils from the same high school. The two teachers were chosen to be interviewed about the factors that influence students' academic performance and the classroom tactics that might have been employed to overcome such factors. Both teachers are TESL teachers with bachelor's degrees. One of the teachers has over 20 years of teaching experience, while the other is a new teacher with less than 5 years of teaching experience. Both teachers are the class teachers for the underachieving classes. In the present study, these two teachers were class teachers of the three underachieving pupils who were part of this study. The pupil respondents comprised three low-academic performing students from the school. These students ranged in age from 16 to 17 and came from secondary years 4 and 5 in the school. The purposive sampling method was used, and the students were selected based on their consistently lower-than-average performance in the last three school-based assessments as well as their regular classroom performance as reported by their teachers who were their class teachers and respondents in the study.

Data Collection Procedures

A series of interviews with teachers and students at the times and dates of their choosing served as the research tools in this study. Interviews are a productive way to gather information for case studies and qualitative research. Additionally, it is one of the best methods for eliciting spontaneous descriptions of the experiences and difficulties that participants had when participating in teaching and learning sessions (Creswell, 2003). In addition to the interview, the participant's actions, emotions, thoughts, knowledge, and preferences were noted. To accommodate the information offered and the flow of the participants' experiences, the interviews were semi[1]structured. The study questions served as the framework for interview questions that were given to the participants (teachers and students). They were sized precisely. They were adjusted to the students' level of comprehension to grasp and correctly respond to the questions based on their experience as a student in the school in order to fulfil the research questions and study objectives. An overview of the research's questioning structure is given below.

i) Participants: Teachers

The interview questions for the teachers were framed around their perceptions of the following.

- (a) Factors that contribute to poor academic achievement among underachieving pupils
- (b) Whether parents understood and supported their children/s education progress
- (c) Whether teachers provided extra support to students' learning
- (d) Learning environment of underachieving students

- (e) Curriculum challenges
- (f) Effective classroom techniques or strategies for underachieving students

ii) Participants: Students

The interview questions for the students were focused on Research Question 1 which covered the following aspects:

- (a) Internal and external motivation to learn
- (b) Circle of friends
- (c) Mental and physical health
- (d) Pupils' nutritional status
- (e) Family background and involvement
- (f) Gadgets for learning and support provided
- (g) Teacher support and encouragement
- (h) Conducive environment for learning

Results

Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Achievement among Underachieving Pupils

The major themes that emerged from the study related to poor academic achievement among underachieving pupils were; family involvement, students' motivation, teachers' role, students' absenteeism and syllabus.

Family Involvement

Everyone who took part in the interviews felt that families should be involved in their children's education. Children who come from broken homes, such as divorced, death of a/both parent(s), or remarried parents, perform poorly in school. Children from such homes were sometimes sent to relatives to live in. Some of these kids might suffer from a lack of supervision, care, a cosy place to study or sleep, or guidance at home. The bond between parents and children is essential for the child's healthy development, as it provides them with a sense of security, stability, and emotional support. Focus group participants also brought up extreme situations in which they knew that children had been subjected to severe physical and mental abuse, including being deprived of food. These factors were listed as the main causes of inactivity in learning or stunted growth in educational development, especially when combined with a complete lack of parental participation. Moreover half of the underachieving students, according to teachers 1 and 2, do not have parental support for their academics.

Teacher 1: No, must ask if they have their breakfast...Sometimes we bring our own cookies or buns or anything like that. I will give some to them. Maybe they won't even eat in the canteen. They said..Oh...I didn't bring money. My parents didn't put the money on the table. I'm used to it.

Teacher 2: The parents just let their children be as they are because they have no time to check their homework. And also some are from broken family.

Student 2: I am staying with my aunt...my mom passed away and my father goes to work. Most of the time it's just me and my aunt. (translated from Bahasa Malaysia to English)

Student 3: Most of the time I don't eat before going to school and also during recess as well, only eat lunch and dinner... I get used to it. (translated from Bahasa Malaysia to English)

The teacher participants also acknowledged the importance of a family's financial position in providing for a child's educational needs. Teachers have discovered from their own

experiences that parents' inability to offer a sufficient study space, technology, or internet connection has hindered students' learning and contributed to their subpar academic performance. Children struggled to function at their best in this environment, which led to poor grades. In almost all participant responses, the education level of the parents stood out in addition to the physical and emotional home surroundings. According to Teacher 1, parents with a high rate of illiteracy would be unable to support their kids since they lack the literacy needed to assist their underachieving kids with their studies.

Teacher 2: ...that's because of the family background and the way how the parents, how the parents treat them.. Because majority are from Lembah Subang...you know the education level of the parents not as high.

Teacher 1: they don't communicate in English, the only time they speak English is during English class, in the school...So other than that, maybe they listen to English songs and that, but they don't talk as much.

Students' Motivation

The incentive component was a further pattern that surfaced across all sets of interviews. It was discovered that motivation significantly influences student learning. When students lacked self-control and motivation, they were not inspired to be dedicated to learning, demanding the full support of teachers and parents. Students that perform poorly have self-doubts about their abilities, which results in a lack of attention and confidence. Without support in their lives, this self-doubt was identified as a reason for giving up and for lacking ambition to try again. When young children do not receive the essential assistance for their learning, Teacher 2 from the teachers' interviews claims, "they turn to something more straightforward and easier to do for a living, such as jobs that do not require an education." Teacher 1 claimed that students' poor self-esteem was what kept them motivated to learn. These underachieving students didn't wish to outperform peers or high achievers. Low self-esteem causes some underachieving students to have reading difficulties, struggle in school, and even quit out. These kids struggled a lot in elementary school and left before finishing secondary education. Also thought to have affected underachieving students was their social milieu. When students see their parents working as mechanics, truck drivers, and other traditional plantations, they realise that they can have a job and make money without a college degree. Teachers 1 and 2 concurred that a student's motivation is greatly influenced by their social environment.

Teacher 1: The underachieving students don't feel a sense to compete with each other academically....they will tell each other...you don't know how to do it, me too, so there is this peer influence of not even trying.

Teachers' Role and Syllabus

Another issue in the study that emerged was teachers. Additionally, teachers acknowledged that it was challenging to teach courses with mixed Levels of Mastery (TP) students. They had to offer the high performing students the same amount of attention, therefore they could not afford to spend the extra time needed to focus on the underachieving students. Despite Teacher 1's best efforts to teach in a short amount of time, she claims that "underachieving students do not always follow, listen, or cooperate." Teacher 2 repeated this, stating that the hour allowed to us to conduct the classes was not enough time to manage students of different grade levels in the same classroom. In addition to having trouble giving each student equal attention, teachers had trouble responding to varied instruction levels, finishing the

syllabus, creating extra worksheets. Teacher 1: *for the one hour class, we only teach 15 to 20 minutes....The rest we try to talk to them, yes, we try to like... And the class cannot go on already...the students can't follow or listen and even not cooperating.*

Teacher 2: *for me the lower secondary classes I'm going to use the worksheet and then from there we know we can identify and then if we make a create the worksheet we have to like to have three different levels, maybe section A easy level maybe at the beginner level can answer the section A, section B intermediate level. And C, of course for the advanced learner. ...This mostly for lower secondary students, for upper secondary we don't have time for that.*

In addition to having trouble giving each student equal attention, teachers also had trouble adapting different levels of instruction, finishing the syllabus, creating extra worksheets, and giving homework assignments and guidance to both high- performing and underachieving students in the same classroom. Some students reported that the repetitive teaching methods of some teachers had occasionally made them lose motivation.

Student 1 mentioned*I don't enjoy the class because the teacher keeps on giving more exercises, I don't really know how to do it.*

Students' Absenteeism

The fourth element that contributed to students' poor performance was absenteeism. The absence of students suggested that they were "bored" in class. Their inability to recognise the importance of education in their life was a reflection of their own immaturity. The reasons given for missing school ranged from the important to the unimportant. One of the many interesting reasons students did not attend school was taking up the gig economy role. When they are able to contribute to the financial aspect, they may experience a greater sense of empowerment due to several reasons, including feeling a sense of ownership over their finances, gaining a feeling of independence and responsibility, and contributing to their family or personal goals. There are significant consequences for a student's education and long-term prospects. Education is essential for building skills, gaining knowledge, and creating opportunities for a successful career. By choosing to prioritize gig economy work over school, students may be limiting their options and limiting their potential for future success.

Teacher 2:*also the financial problem because the upper forms, some of them did part-time jobs such as a Grab food rider. So for them, money is power, so they don't focus on their study because for them they can earn money. Even for my class, when I do the informal survey and then they said teacher, I can get RM200.00 per day. So those are the things they feel. They feel there is no need to study. Because of Form 4, they are 16 years old and they can apply for a motorcycle license. So I think that is the reason why they are lacking the motivation in studying because they can get money.*

Teacher 1:*Some parents in the lower socioeconomic...I am the class teacher of the last class. Some even call me and ask whether the child is in school. I mean, it's sad to see all these things and they are teenagers, you know? So their mind is very free to get all the negative things.*

Some of the students gave details about their inability to attend class on a regular basis, including reasons linked to financial limitations, remote living situations, and transportation issues. In the education index, absenteeism among underachieving students is a serious concern. Due to the circumstance, they are lagging behind in their classroom learning because teachers will be unable to support the students.

Strategies to Overcome Factors Contributing to Underachieving Students' Progress

Strategies by Parents

Parents must be encouraged and motivated to help their kids' academic success and recognise that they play a crucial part in their development. Children are more likely to succeed when their parents and instructors support them and collaborate. A strong support structure must be put in place for underperforming students in order to regularly acknowledge their work, contribution, or accomplishments and motivate them to improve.

Teacher 1: *The role of the parents is very important....although the parents want to scold the child for not doing well, they know they're not paying attention to the child and some more if they want to scold ...it will create a rift.*

No matter how well they accomplish, every child needs encouragement to boost their self-esteem. Parents should support, review, and pay attention to their children's abilities rather than writing them off as underachieving students and giving up. Parental support can take many forms, including providing a quiet and structured environment for studying, helping with homework, attending parent-teacher conferences, and showing interest in their children's academic progress. When parents actively engage in their children's academic life, they send a message that education is essential and that they value their children's efforts. Studies have shown that children whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to have better attendance, higher grades, and improved attitudes toward school.

Strategies by Teachers

Teacher 2 asserts that educators must pay great attention to and exercise patience with struggling students. When dealing with and training underachieving students, teachers should be composed, patient, and attentive. Teacher 2 added that educators must be prepared to accept responsibility. There should be no ego or sense of superiority when working with kids. In order to continually improve how they teach children and pay attention to their demands, teachers should be open to student criticism and suggestions. Effective teaching and learning should not be hindered by personal ego, and educators should constantly be willing to accept criticism in order to enhance their teaching strategies. To ensure that students feel comfortable learning and addressing their weaknesses in order to find practical solutions, teachers should be approachable and kind.

Teacher 1: *See, our aim is to make them pass when you come to the exam we are all that. That is the goal. To pass.. So our aim is to make them at least write something minimum so they could have 40 marks to pass. So we cannot focus on anything else, whether in their attitude or anything. Whatever you do, it is just based on this. So that has been. That's what has been driving us to do only for academic purposes.*

For students to feel comfortable learning and discussing their areas of weakness in order to come up with workable solutions to problems or challenges, teachers must be approachable and nice. It may take time, but it will be worthwhile to identify underachieving students and give them instruction that is appropriate for their level of ability. Most students that perform poorly are unable to follow the curriculum. It was suggested by Teacher 1 that teachers identify and separate underachieving students from high-performing students. Then, underachieving students should be led based on their talents.

Strategies by School Administrators and Managers

Complex studies should not be assigned to students as part of their schoolwork because this will not, in the long term, advance their learning or strategies. A student's interest or focus may be piqued by the inclusion of enjoyable activities, inventiveness, and original or artistic pursuits. Giving underachieving students an appropriate module will boost their confidence and self-worth. The government might standardise the modules being supplied to

underachieving and high-performing students in accordance, as opposed to exclusively relying on instructors to provide compatible modules for underachieving students. It is important to support and take into account the teaching strategies, ideas, and suggestions of teachers in order to advance teaching and learning. Organizations like non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and Parents Teachers Associations should develop plans to aid in reaching out to people.

Teacher 2: ...and also the school facilities...maybe they have no motivation to learn using traditional books..if the school or any sponsors can provide gadgets for students' learning...maybe this could change their perception...they are more engaged and excited to learn when I use Kahoot in the classroom...

Associations like Parents Teachers Associations (PTAs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) should come up with outreach plans to help these populations of students and their parents who were not aware of the resources available to them or how to apply for them. As underachieving students are more likely to participate in learning due to the distinctive design and fun activities offered online, information and communications technology (ICT) should be encouraged in the classroom. The use of online platforms and resources can offer a more distinctive and personalized learning experience, which can be particularly beneficial for underachieving students who may struggle with traditional classroom methods. Online resources and activities can be tailored to the individual needs and learning styles of students, helping them to better understand and retain information.

Teacher 1: Counsellors are doing a good job and anything we say this class, this student is behaving like this like this and then they will come.

Teacher 2: We have a program called 'Kunjung Bantu' for students who have got family problems and then we will go to their house to ask the parents what's the problem and all....

Teacher 1: We have student welfare exco that will identify students' needs and issues they are facing for example they have been absent for 20 days...and found out they have got no shoes, no money, father is a security guard, some got no father...then ok we will give some money.

Discussion

The main factors related to poor academic achievement among underachieving students were family involvement, students' motivation, teachers' role, student absenteeism and syllabus matter.

In this the study confirmed the findings from previous studies by Mallika, et. al (2022) that a student that is driven may be able to work harder towards their academic goals, participate in more in-depth study, and perform better in class. A student's intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, self-determination, and general drive for education, career ambitions, and grades can all be enhanced by strong external motivation. It was also discovered that this desire, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, was closely related to other emerging factors, particularly parental and family participation. The current study also supports earlier research on the impact of parental participation on student achievement by (Ozcan, 2021). A child's communication, confidence, and preparation for school are all impacted by their parents' involvement. Children need their parents' attention, guidance, enjoyable interactions, and bonding time in order to grow, develop their confidence to be successful in school, and assist minimise absenteeism and subpar academic performance. Parents, teachers, and peers should interact frequently with students to boost their confidence and help them ask questions, express ideas, and give confident answers. This will help learning go more smoothly and help close achievement disparities. The results also specifically underlined the importance of teachers, whose

professionalism and overall approach towards both high- and low-achieving students affected their motivation, learning, and ultimately academic success. Once more, this is consistent with Sueb, et.al (2020) conclusion regarding the link between student accomplishment and teacher quality. The findings revealed the necessity of matching the curriculum to each student's level of academic proficiency, which also raised the issue of how teachers will be able to strike a balance between adhering to a curriculum that has been established by the Ministry of Education and determining what their students need to advance. It has become abundantly evident that cooperation is required between the key stakeholders, including parents, school administration, teachers, and policymakers, in attempts to improve academic achievement, particularly of underachieving pupils. Additionally, everyone should be taught the value of education, collaboration, engagement, and teamwork in order to have an influence and make sure that underachieving students have a positive learning experience.

Conclusion

This study examined not just the causes of low academic accomplishment among students who struggled academically, but also the solutions or methods for overcoming these shortfalls. Due to the qualitative case study methodology that was used, several of the elements, such as family participation and motivation while correlating with the findings of other studies, were addressed in-depth and personally. The study discovered that, in general, Malaysia's schools are not exempt from this factor's contribution to underachievers. The issues that students face are numerous and go unrecognized or unanswered by anyone for a variety of reasons, some of which are ignored. This study's conclusions showed that underachieving pupils face a number of challenges in their academic aspirations. Collaborative initiatives from various related parties are needed to overcome these issues.

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