

TEACHERS have to deal with different levels of learning ability and attitude towards studying every day in schools and educational institutions.

Some students are precocious with a natural passion for learning, while others are just not academically inclined.

Students' learning difficulties can be indicated by the presence of specific problems in achieving preferable learning results. These may involve psychological, sociological, and physiological factors, which can lead to irregular learning achievements.

In their research on the underachievement phenomenon among students, Dr. Chan Siaw Leng, a senior lecturer and a registered counsellor, and Joyce Morris Kapong, a senior language instructor at Universiti Putra Malaysia Bintulu Sarawak Campus (UPMKB), came up with a few recommendations.

They emphasised the need to understand several aspects of educational psychology, such as the characteristics of the underachieving student, the factors causing underachievement, and how to help the underachiever.

Chan and Joyce believe understanding the phenomenon of student underachievement through educational psychology would benefit not only the students, teachers, and school counsellors, but also parents in addressing related issues and formulating effective ways to support the students.

According to them, identifying underachievement is closely linked to recognising potential and learning outcomes.

There are two categories: first is situational underachievement, which occurs when the student gets into trouble at home or with the teacher. Next is chronic underachievement, where the student experiences continuous underachievement for at least a year.

Evident traits

Several traits are evident in the underachiever, primarily a sense of low self-esteem, followed by avoidance behaviour and tertiary-effective learning behaviour characteristics.

The primary characteristics emerge when teachers and parents expect the student to perform well in school. However, as he lacks trust in himself, he dare not express his thoughts and feelings.

The secondary characteristic emerges when a student objects to being called incapable but is reluctant to do anything about it, and thinks there is no point in making amends.

The student believes the results cannot be maximised and avoids hard work, believing that learning is pointless and blames the school for his own poor attitude. Such students are perceived as lazy.

Chan and Joyce noted that in the case of tertiary characteristics, the underachieving student would try to cover his low self-esteem by influencing others. This results in negative behaviours such as a lack of motivation to learn, inability to concentrate, and interfering with or mocking friends with high learning motivation.

"Not every student displays characteristics of underachievement," they said. "On the other hand, it is possible that underachieving students may display all the above characteristics. These students differ from most students in terms of motivation, as they are less driven to



The school and the community can provide various opportunities to learn. - THE BORNEO POST

Helping the underachievers

Two educators offer recommendations to deal with this often-neglected group of students



Chan (left) and Joyce shared their insights on helping underachievers succeed.

be successful in school."

Underachievement factors

According to them, underachievement is influenced by external factors and the students themselves. The social behaviour of an underachiever is attributed to unmet demand. However, some studies cannot relate the locus of control to underachievement but, instead, find a connection to low external performance.

Underachievement is also associated with the concept of self-development. For instance, a student who experiences failure limits himself from achieving his or others' desired expectations.

Additionally, internal and external focus, specifically concerning students, culture, family, social circle, and school space, are linked to underachievement.

Based on their research, a student's underachievement may derive from an irrational desire to handle a handful of tasks.

However, the student refuses the guidance that emphasises the importance of academic courses. Instead, he attends too many extra-curricular events and is unable to determine the right priorities.

A strong desire for leadership in extra-curricular activities can be manipulated or disguised as self-defence, and his success in extra-curricular activities is used to balance academic failure.

Studies in students' underachievement have found that motivation and standards of value are key factors in determining the reasons students do not succeed.

The students lack the will to seek assistance in improving their low achievement. Hence, the studies suggest students who are proficient in each subject are highly motivated individuals, while the students who always avoid performing in school have low motivation. They frequently experience difficulties in stressful situations and challenges.

Chan and Joyce also observed that unrealistically high demands for competency in classes, evaluation systems, and complicated curriculums could trigger underachievement in a more competitive academic environment.

"Students, unfortunately, have not increased in intelligence as compared to before they entered school. Those who do succeed academically show a lower socialisation level compared to non-athletic students who do not."

They also noted that other factors causing underachievement included study skills, time management, subject difficulty level, and environmental factors.

"Underachievers may also encounter issues such as unpreparedness, time-management, self-discipline, and motivation. Consequently, many underachieving students have expressed concern that

they are not ready to face school difficulties."

Providing help

Several ways to help underachievers include understanding their behaviour, identifying the growth of self-confidence, and changing their perception of individual responsibility and self-awareness.

"Underachievers are encouraged to focus on time management and study skills, relaxation and meditation techniques, and recreate their learning purposes and outcomes," the duo said in their study.

They further explained that learning skills, meta-cognitive strategies, and motivational programme modules should be put into practise in schools to address and minimise underachievement issues.

"Alternatively, help may also be found in educational research as a credible resource in informing and indicating the psychology of underachievers."

They stressed school counsellors could use the available psychological inventory to assess key dimensions of the underachieving students' personalities to help them perform optimally in school.

"This knowledge is vital because underachieving and high achieving students have different types of personalities. The psychotherapy approach is a new technique to encounter underachievement among students.

"Formulations of a psychological approach to psychotherapy have been developed to understand the dynamics of underachievement and behavioural symptoms."

These symptoms, they noted, occurred after exploring conflicts between the underachiever with his family, friends, and school, as well as conflicts of identity and self-confidence that could be addressed through psychotherapy.

"Psychologists and counsellors use an in-depth psycho-educational approach in understanding the cognitive and emotional needs of students' underachievement because the psychological conflicts have become a culmination of destructive behaviours among underachieving

students.

"Additionally, the psycho-educational approach is also used to adjust the behaviour of underachievers, such as flight behaviour, confusion, deviant behaviour, and other provocative behaviours.

"Alternatively, school counsellors and educators have found that self-empowerment is more likely to be effective in improving the students' academic performance and well-being," based on their research.

Both researchers suggested that counsellors, psychologists, and educators could adopt four approaches in helping underachieving students.

"The first is to raise awareness of the issue as a universal social problem. Counsellors and educators may need to re-examine their expectations and perceptions of school performance. They need to communicate ways to foster a positive and optimistic attitude in students.

"The second is to involve students in proactive discussions on success factors, for example in education and future aspirations. The discussions can take place in small or large groups and can cover language, arts, or social studies.

"The third is student self-empowerment which can be practical with the involvement of family members, schools and the community through modelling, providing various opportunities to learn, encouraging positive relationships, and developing procedures or discipline during learning.

"And the fourth includes motivational and time management strategies as part of orientation programmes."

They also pointed out that the underachievement phenomenon was not outlandish in the education system. One solution that could be recommended when dealing with the phenomenon of underachievement is adopting the psychotherapeutic approach, mainly through cognitive and emotional intervention, they added in their research. - The Borneo Post