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Psychological Factors Influencing Underachievement In Primary School Students

Zulfiyeva Sarvinoz

Trainee teacher at the Department of Psychology at Faculty of Psychology at Jizzakh Branch of National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Teachers, psychologists, and policy makers are still very worried about students who do poorly in school, but they don't always know why some kids who are otherwise smart do poorly. This paper analyzes essential psychological factors that affect underachievement in primary school students, specifically emphasizing motivation, self-regulation, cognitive processes, emotional functioning, and self-concept. The article is predicated on a narrative review and conceptual analysis of contemporary theoretical and empirical research in educational and developmental psychology. The interaction among executive functions, achievement motivation, school-related anxiety, and perceived competence is emphasized, along with the mediating influence of family and classroom contexts. The analysis indicates that underachievement seldom results from a singular deficiency; instead, it arises from the cumulative impact of inadequate self-regulation, fluctuating motivation, detrimental beliefs regarding capability, and maladaptive emotional reactions to academic challenges. These elements are ingrained in relational dynamics with parents and educators and are additionally influenced by the school climate and expectations. The paper concludes with implications for psychological assessment and intervention, emphasizing the necessity for early identification of risk profiles, the systematic cultivation of self-regulatory and motivational competencies, and the collaborative efforts of teachers, school psychologists, and families to establish supportive learning environments.

Keywords: Underachievement; primary education; academic performance; motivation; self-regulation; school-related anxiety; self-perception; executive functions.

Introduction: Underachievement in primary school students is generally characterized by a consistent gap between a child's exhibited potential and their actual academic performance. In the classroom, this difference is often seen in students who are curious, good at reasoning, and good at verbal expression, but who consistently get low or inconsistent grades, don't turn in their work, or drop out of learning activities. It is normal for groups of children to have some differences in how well they do, but when they consistently do poorly, it can lead to lower educational achievement, lower self-esteem, and a higher chance of dropping out of school later on. Consequently, comprehending the reasons behind the chronic underperformance of certain children relative to their capabilities has emerged as a pivotal concern in educational research and school psychology.

Historically, explanations for underachievement have predominantly focused on external or structural factors, including socio-economic disadvantage, subpar instruction, and restricted access to learning resources. These circumstances undoubtedly influence children's learning opportunities; however, they do not entirely elucidate the reasons behind the underachievement of certain students, even in well-resourced educational institutions with specialized academic assistance. In the past 30 years, psychological research has looked more and more at the internal processes that affect the link between opportunity and performance. These include achievement motivation, expectancy-value beliefs, self-efficacy, goal orientations, and attributional styles. This field of study has shown that the way kids understand school, how they control their behavior and attention, and how they deal with their feelings in class are all important factors in how well they do in school.

The development of these psychological mechanisms is

especially sensitive during primary school. In the early years of formal education, children develop not only essential academic skills but also overarching beliefs regarding their learning abilities and the significance of success and failure in an educational context. They must maintain attention for prolonged durations, adhere to intricate directives, independently organize their tasks, and manage evaluative feedback. As the demands of instruction increase, executive functions and self-regulatory abilities become more important. At the same time, peer comparison and grading practices make achievement more important for children's developing sense of self. Problems in any of these areas can lead to behaviors like avoiding and disengaging that eventually turn into chronic underachievement.

The goal of this article is to organize the most important psychological factors that lead to poor performance in primary school students and to explain how these factors work together in real classrooms. Based on a narrative review of current theoretical and empirical research, this paper examines five interconnected areas: motivational processes, self-regulation and executive functions, emotional functioning with a focus on school anxiety, academic self-concept and attributional style, and the perceived quality of relationships with parents and teachers. The article reframes underachievement not as a static attribute of the child, but as a dynamic result arising from the interplay between individual traits and the psychological environment of both the family and the school. The last parts talk about what this means for testing, prevention, and intervention in primary school settings.

METHOD

This paper is founded on a narrative review and conceptual synthesis of research regarding the psychological determinants of academic underachievement during the primary school years. The review concentrated on theoretical and empirical literature in educational psychology, developmental psychology, and school psychology that investigated the correlations between psychological traits and academic performance in children approximately aged six to eleven years. Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and monographs that provided clear operational definitions of underachievement or that closely examined related constructs such as low engagement, school disengagement, and inconsistent performance relative to ability were prioritized.

We found relevant literature by searching electronic databases like PsycINFO, ERIC, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for combinations of keywords like "underachievement," "academic achievement," "primary school," "elementary school," "motivation," "self-regulation," "executive functions," "school anxiety," and "self-concept." We also looked at the reference lists of important articles and books to find more sources. Studies were included if they presented empirical data on primary school children or offered theoretical frameworks directly relevant to this demographic. Studies concentrating solely on adolescents or university students were referenced only when they presented concepts that could be significantly extrapolated to younger children.

Because the article's goal was to bring everything together, no formal meta-analytic procedures were used. Instead, the results were looked at using methods of theoretical generalization, comparison, and systematization. The chosen studies were categorized based on the primary psychological factors they examined, and efforts were made to identify converging evidence across various methodological frameworks, including longitudinal, cross-sectional, and intervention studies. Particular emphasis was placed on the functioning of psychological processes within distinct familial and educational settings, and on their potential role as mediators between demographic factors and academic achievement. The conclusions in the paper are a summary of different research studies, not a number that shows how big the effects were.

The literature review shows that primary school students who don't do well in school may be the result of several psychological processes that are linked to each other, not just one. The initial cluster of factors pertains to children's motivational beliefs and goal orientations. Research based on expectancy-value and self-determination theories indicates that children who consistently undervalue their own abilities, attribute their successes and failures to external factors, or perceive minimal personal significance in academic tasks are especially vulnerable to underachievement. When kids think that intelligence is fixed and that doing well in school is mostly due to natural ability, they tend to see failures as proof that they are not very good at something and can't get better. This interpretation weakens persistence, makes people want to avoid difficult tasks, and pushes people to set performance goals that are more about protecting their self-esteem than learning new skills. Over time, these kinds of motivational patterns turn into stable habits of doing as little as possible and not being involved, even when teachers and parents still believe in the child's potential.

Self-regulation and executive functions are the second group of psychological factors. Students who are not doing well often have trouble staying focused, stopping

themselves from acting on impulse, planning their work, and keeping track of how well they are doing on tasks. Studies on school readiness have shown that executive functions are strong indicators of early academic success, even when taking general intelligence into account. They also help kids adjust to the structured demands of the classroom. In real life, problems with working memory, inhibitory control, or cognitive flexibility can show up as unfinished homework, careless mistakes, or trouble following instructions that have more than one step. Teachers may interpret such behavior as laziness or defiance; however, from a psychological standpoint, it often indicates a restricted ability to manage cognitive resources over time. When these issues go unnoticed, kids get a lot of negative feedback and fail over and over again, which makes them even less motivated and confident.

Emotional functioning represents a significant domain. Numerous primary school students exhibiting underachievement experience elevated levels of school-related anxiety, adverse emotional states during academic activities, or broader difficulties in emotional regulation. The fear of being judged, the fear of making mistakes in front of others, and memories of bad experiences from the past can all make you feel anxious and make it hard to focus and solve problems. In certain instances, children react to anxiety by evading situations where they may experience failure, such as declining participation, delaying homework, or intentionally neglecting test preparation to safeguard their self-esteem. In some cases, unresolved emotional stress from family problems, bullying, or other life events can drain the cognitive and motivational resources needed to stay focused on schoolwork for a long time. The literature indicates that chronic emotional distress is especially detrimental when adults perceive it merely as misbehavior, resulting in punitive reactions instead of supportive emotional regulation and coping strategies.

A fourth set of factors pertains to academic self-concept and attributional style. Children who don't do well in school often have conflicting ideas about themselves. For example, they might think they're smart in casual situations but "bad students" in school. When teachers and parents focus on grades or rankings instead of small steps forward or effort, this split gets worse. Kids who hear over and over that they aren't trying hard enough or who compare themselves unfavorably to more successful classmates are likely to start believing bad things about their abilities. Attributional research indicates that when failure is attributed to stable internal factors, such as lack of ability, children are more likely to relinquish their efforts compared to when it is ascribed to controllable elements, such as strategy utilization or effort. Over time, these habits of interpreting things change how people expect to do in the future and create a cycle of low effort and low achievement that keeps going.

Lastly, underachievement is deeply rooted in relational and contextual factors, especially the quality of interactions with parents and teachers. From the child's viewpoint, these relationships are not merely sources of external pressures but essential contexts in which the psychological significance of achievement is formulated. Overprotective parents, inconsistent expectations, or mixed messages about how important education is can make kids think that success is either impossible or not worth the effort. On the other hand, parents who are very controlling or perfectionistic may put a lot of pressure on their children to do well, which, ironically, makes them more anxious and less likely to do well. In the classroom, teacher expectations and ways of giving feedback are similar. Children are more likely to lose interest and not try when teachers call them weak or lazy, mostly use comparative evaluation, or show little warmth. In classrooms that view mistakes as chances to learn, encourage participation, and provide different types of instruction, psychological risk factors are lessened and underachievement is less likely to become a stable pattern.

It is clear from the research that these motivational, regulatory, emotional, and relational processes seldom function independently. Instead, they interact in intricate manners to influence the progression from initial learning experiences to subsequent achievement patterns. A child with moderate executive function difficulties may still achieve success if the instruction is well-structured and adults offer consistent encouragement; conversely, the same cognitive profile in a more stressful or punitive environment may lead to significant underachievement. Likewise, the effect of school anxiety is contingent upon children's coping mechanisms and their perception of adult support. The literature thus endorses a transactional perspective, positing that underachievement in primary education results from the continuous interaction between children's psychological traits and the opportunities and limitations of their educational contexts.

The synthesized findings depict underachievement in primary education as a dynamic, multifactorial phenomenon arising from the interplay between children's psychological attributes and the social contexts of learning. From this viewpoint, it is evident that concentrating exclusively on the remediation of academic skills is inadequate. Targeted instruction in reading, writing, or mathematics can enhance performance; however, it fails to tackle the

motivational, self-regulatory, emotional, and relational factors that initially caused the gap between potential and achievement. To be effective, prevention and intervention must include academic support as well as planned efforts to change how kids think, feel, and act when it comes to school.

One significant implication pertains to the formulation of classroom practices that cultivate adaptive motivational beliefs. Teachers can help kids see that difficulty is a normal and even good part of learning, focus on mastery and improvement instead of comparing themselves to others, and give feedback that focuses on effort, strategy use, and persistence instead of fixed ability. When kids see the classroom as a place where mistakes are okay and talked about in a helpful way, they are more likely to set learning goals and see effort as important. These practices are particularly crucial during the initial years of education, as children are in the process of developing overarching beliefs regarding their own abilities and the meaning of academic success.

The literature also says that one of the main goals of primary education should be to help students learn how to control themselves. Teaching methods that make kids plan their work, keep track of their progress, and think about their strategies help them develop executive functions and metacognitive skills. Teachers can demonstrate self-regulatory processes by verbalizing their thought processes during problem-solving, facilitating the use of checklists or visual organizers, and incrementally shifting the responsibility for regulation to the students. When these practices are used with tasks that aren't too hard and clear routines, kids who aren't very good at self-regulation are less likely to feel overwhelmed or use avoidant coping strategies.

Paying attention to how emotions work is just as important. School-based prevention programs that teach kids how to identify their feelings, use relaxation techniques, and change the way they think about bad things have been shown to improve both their emotional health and their schoolwork. In primary school, many instances of disruptive behavior or apparent apathy conceal anxiety, shame, or fear of failure. When teachers and school psychologists learn to spot these signs and respond with helpful, non-stigmatizing interventions, kids can learn to deal with their feelings without shutting down or acting out. Working together with families is very important in this case because emotional stressors outside of school often affect engagement in the classroom.

The relational aspect of underachievement underscores the necessity of collaboration among parents, educators, and mental health practitioners. Parents need help with how to set high but realistic expectations, how to give their child structure without being too controlling, and how to handle setbacks in a way that keeps their child's sense of competence. Teachers also benefit from knowing about the family situation and working with parents as partners instead of blaming them for the child's problems. Adults can work together to make intervention plans that coordinate strategies at home and at school when communication is open and respectful. For example, they can set up consistent homework routines, reward small steps forward, and give the child chances to succeed in areas that are important to them.

Another implication pertains to assessment methodologies. Since underachievement frequently entails nuanced interplays of cognitive, motivational, and emotional weaknesses, dependence solely on standardized test scores or grades is insufficient. A thorough assessment should include observational data, teacher reports, child self-reports about their emotions and motivation, and, when appropriate, short tests of executive functions or self-regulation. This kind of assessment using multiple methods can show different risk profiles and help create personalized interventions instead of just telling people to "try harder." It can also help tell the difference between underachievement that is mostly caused by psychological factors and underachievement that is linked to specific learning disorders, sensory impairments, or other conditions that need specialized help.

Underachievement in primary school students results from the interplay of various psychological processes that develop over time within familial and educational environments. Motivational beliefs, executive functions, self-regulation, emotional functioning, academic self-concept, and the quality of relationships with significant adults collectively influence the extent to which a child's abilities are reflected in consistent academic performance. When these processes work well, they help kids deal with short-term problems and keep them interested in learning. When disrupted or undermined by environmental factors, they can result in persistent patterns of avoidance, minimal effort, and suboptimal achievement despite sufficient potential.

Looking at underachievement from this complex psychological point of view has big effects on how schools work. It posits that efficacious support necessitates the early identification of risk profiles, the systematic enhancement of self-regulatory skills and adaptive motivational beliefs, a vigilant focus on emotional well-being, and a collaborative partnership among educators, parents, and school psychologists.

Instead of calling kids lazy or unmotivated, teachers should look at the specific psychological processes that are going on and come up with ways to help that directly target these processes. Additional empirical research, especially within varied cultural and socio-economic frameworks, is essential to enhance our comprehension of the interplay among these factors and to evaluate the efficacy of comprehensive, multi-tiered interventions. Nevertheless, the current literature provides a solid basis for strategies that can assist primary school students in converting latent potential into actual academic success.

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