

## Strategies for improving the academic performance of low achievers

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Despite using various strategies to improve learning, a vast number of students continue to find themselves stuck in the 'low academic achievers' category. This is evident from both formative and summative test results. Many teachers are concerned about this and question themselves and others on how the problem can be addressed. Before teachers can devise and implement any strategy, however, it is essential to identify the reasons for poor performance.

This paper looks at 12 common reasons, all of which are based on my experience as a teacher and my school-based research over many years. Ways of addressing the problems are also suggested.

### **1. General lack of interest in school work**

Causes of this are many: poor health, undiagnosed hearing or sight defects, or any of the factors listed below. Each case should be handled individually and professionally by someone qualified, such as a school counsellor.

### **2. Lack of interest in specific subjects**

Liaise with other teachers who teach the student and compare his/her performance in other subjects. Arrange to observe some lessons in a subject the student does well in and try to emulate the strategies used by the teacher of that subject. Focus on making your lessons interesting, with a variety of activities such as group work, presentations and research, which allow students to interact with each other. Show that **you** are interested in the subject matter; this is often

infectious. Show, too, that you are interested in the students' progress rather than their lack of it, i.e. be positive.

### **3. Home environment problems**

Family disputes, large family size, too many chores at home, poor study environment, financial difficulties — all these can prevent children from being happy and participating fully at school.

Teachers get to hear of these problems in various ways and can sometimes be instrumental in helping their students. School administrators can be consulted and the parents can be invited to the school for a discussion. This can alert the parents about how the home environment is affecting their child, and suggestions on how to improve it can be put forward. In the case of financial difficulties, it may be possible to organise the assistance of local social and charitable organisations or a school staff welfare fund for children in need. A word of caution: work through the school, rather than on an individual basis, as direct involvement in personal family matters can be very difficult.

### **4. Excessive extra-curricular activities and responsibilities**

There is often an imbalance in the number of activities and responsibilities undertaken by students with some, often the high achievers, doing too many and others, the low achievers, too few. Teachers can liaise with each other to ensure that students get their fair share, and **all** students feel they are important.

### **5. Too much homework**

A school homework timetable can ensure that students do not have too many assignments on one day and too few the next day. Make sure that the homework is very specific and within the students' capabilities, reinforcing or applying the work covered in class, or preparing something for a future class. (If you have students in your class who want extra work, give it to them but do not expect all students to do it, and do not use class time to go over it.)

### **6. Punishment and humiliation**

Punishing a student for getting something wrong is unacceptable. There are many reasons students make mistakes, such as misunderstanding the task, poor teaching, carelessness and so on. Teachers can try to find out why the student made the mistake and act accordingly.

Ridicule, laughing at mistakes, while tempting at times, is also unacceptable and must be avoided. Humiliation can be very demoralising. Section 25 (1) of the Republic of the Fiji Islands Constitution states: "Every person has the right to freedom from torture of any kind, whether physical, mental or emotional and from cruel, inhumane, degrading or disproportionately severe treatment or punishment."

### **7. Boring lessons**

Make an effort to add spice and variety to your lessons. Use different resources, crack a joke, tell a story, involve students in activities, vary the routine. Students respond with enthusiasm when they know their teacher has made an effort to plan and give a good lesson; but they tend to switch off when the teacher comes in empty-handed, looks bored, sits down throughout the lesson and does the same old stuff, day in, day out.

### **8. Unclear teaching**

Teachers need to make their teaching clear. Explanations need to be supported with examples, diagrams, pictures – whatever is appropriate. It is sometimes useful to use the vernacular in order to clarify something, making sure that all students in a multi-lingual class understand. Check students' comprehension. Good questioning techniques are important. Pose the question before calling on a particular student to answer so that all the students are involved, and allow students time to think. Ask open-ended questions requiring recall, application etc, rather than asking: "Do you understand?" or "Isn't it?" or "Am I right?" or "Yes or no?". This type of question requires a chorus answer and the answer is always obvious. A student who has not even understood the question or listened to the teacher will give the expected response.

If your chalkboard work is messy, tidy it up.

Get the students' attention before speaking, and stand up so that all the students can see you well.

Make sure you have a good grasp of the subject matter so that you can deal with queries and misunderstandings. Department meetings provide good opportunities to exchange ideas and information.

### **9. Favouritism**

Some teachers have favourites, and other students are quick to notice this. They feel unappreciated and their confidence is undermined, leading to poor performance. Furthermore, teachers play a vital role in reducing prejudice of any kind; to show prejudice themselves is unethical, unprofessional and damaging.

Some common biased practices are: falsifying test results so that favourites pass, giving them easier tasks, checking only their work and praising only them.

#### **10. Teachers' frequent absence from class**

As role models, teachers should make every effort to teach all their classes. Frequent absences will give students the idea that it is acceptable behaviour. They will also feel that their teacher is not interested in teaching them. Relieving teachers cannot always be found, or are not given adequate information on what to teach. The low achievers will be further disadvantaged.

#### **11. Too many tests**

Conduct formative tests sparingly to avoid putting too much pressure on students and causing truancy and absenteeism. Design tests carefully with a view to the objectives of each question (recall, application etc) and making them short so they do not take up too much valuable class time. Class time is teaching time, first and foremost.

#### **12. Large class size**

Large classes mean that teachers need to employ different strategies in order to be able to devote time to individual students. Group work is a useful strategy in this regard. Lay down the ground rules for group work, organise the classroom during recess or lunch, give very specific tasks to the group, and walk around as they work to check on progress and give advice. You can allow students to choose their own group members or you can be the one to make the selection, whichever you consider appropriate for the work to be covered, and bearing the low achievers in mind. You may feel they should be in a group of mixed ability or in a group of their own.

When doing whole class teaching, make the most of the time the students are doing some written work. It is a good time to walk around, check progress and advise. Don't just sit down and get on with something else.

#### **Conclusion**

Students and parents expect teachers to be instrumental in securing the best possible future for the students. They look on teachers as mentors, experts, 'gurus', educators and as being *in loco parentis* during school hours. It is hoped that teachers will have gained some ideas from this article about helping their 'low achievers'. Teachers can make a great deal of difference to the teaching/learning environment if they understand the problems their students face and develop strategies to improve their performance.

#### **Bibliography**

Some useful books:

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