

TRE04914

Underachievement: A model for improving academic direction in schools
Deborah Trevallion
The University of Newcastle

Abstract

Underachievement occurs when students are not working to their potential and under perform in the classroom. It is a problem that can be compounded by inadequate identification procedures resulting in 'invisible underachievement'. (Chaffey 2003)

This paper will focus on a model designed to assist underachieving gifted students to improve their academic direction. The model focuses on the issues contributing to student underachievement as identified by Coyle (2000). These include building self esteem, improving self concept, increasing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, utilising strategies for improving organisation, study skills, time management and overcoming academic deficiencies. There are a range of application strategies employed in the delivery of this model.

The first section of the paper will present the literature on underachievement, an investigation of student needs, and the development of the model.

The second section will report on the method used to carry out the research of 38 students in years 9 and 10 attending a NSW selective high school.

The third section of the paper will report on findings related to the students' academic success and anecdotal evidence relating to unexpected social outcomes

Gifted children require a differentiated curriculum in order to achieve their potential. Not all educators see the need to cater for gifted children's needs as this is often falsely perceived as elite education. All children, including gifted children have specific learning needs. If these needs are not met then children will underachieve and not reach their potential.

Teachers and staff members provide leadership and are a catalyst for possible change within the school environment. When introducing new ideas and techniques in schools there is often resistance to change.

You can liken a secondary school to a school of sardines. If you take a close look the sardines appear to be swimming in the same direction. In reality, there are always a small group swimming against the flow, causing friction with the rest of the school. When this dedicated group of committed sardines reach a critical mass of 15%-20% they induce the rest of the school to turn and follow their leadership. (de Miranda, 2004)

The staff members displaying leadership skills and promoting change are an essential part of the critical mass that will encourage all staff to differentiate the curriculum for GATS students. Do not get discouraged, keep on swimming!!!

What is underachievement?

Rimm (2002) states that underachievement is simply defined as a discrepancy between expectation and performance and some index of his/her actual ability, such as intelligence, achievement or creativity scores or observational data.

If one is to succeed in designing differentiated education programs for gifted and talented children then, one of the main aims must be to try at all costs to prevent the gifted child developing tendencies toward and/or patterns of underachievement.

In an extensive review on the causes of underachievement, there appears to be no clear profile of attributes to distinguish underachievers from achievers matched on academic potential as results from research tend to be conflicting and inconclusive. This clearly indicates that it is not possible to predict who the underachievers will be based purely on attributes.

Tannenbaum stated that there appears to be only one trait that determines underachievers from achievers and that is that one group succeeds at school and the other does not. He further states that underachievement is caused by an absence of, or a breakdown of, the linkage between promise and fulfilment.

Characteristics and personality traits shared by underachievers.

The primary characteristic associated with underachievers is that of low self-esteem.

The student may mask this with defence mechanisms such as defensive or aggressive behaviour or by acting as the class clown.

They may use learned helplessness. The students may have learned that if they wait long enough and ask the right questions eventually the educator will complete the work for them.

The student will often use an attribution theory where they attribute reasons as to why they couldn't do the work e.g. "I couldn't do it because I didn't have a pen."

A secondary characteristic belonging to underachievers is the student exhibiting avoidance behaviour. Underachieving students say that school is irrelevant and often demonstrate intense interest in out of school activities which are less threatening.

Kaufmann noted that these characteristics present in two main directions, either as aggressive and hostile responses or as a withdrawal (passive and quiet) responses whilst Rimm suggests they will exhibit defences such as dependency where they wait for others to do their work or dominance where they take over the whole group.

The tertiary characteristics and these are only a few include: poor school related skills, poor study habits, peer acceptance problems, poor school concentration, home and school behavioural management problems, boredom, "turned off" school, good oral language but poor written work, inattentive and restless, absorbed in a private world, tactless and impatient of others, excessively self critical, poor relations with peers, class clown, friendly with older students and adults, unconventional behaviour.

The quality Teaching Model, currently being used in NSW government schools will go a long way toward addressing problems associated with these characteristics as is described later in the paper.

Identification of Underachieving Gifted Children

Underachieving children may be difficult to identify because they do not exhibit the positive traits many teachers associate with more able students. The conforming underachievers are even less visible. They often sit and comply with all instructions and tend to be overlooked because they are not disruptive.

The problem of underachievement can be compounded by inadequate identification procedures resulting in students 'invisible underachievement'. (Chaffey 2003)

The following checklist is may be used as a guide to identify students who may fall into the underachievement category.

If the child has a Stanford-Binnet IQ of 140 or above and after observing and interacting with the child over a minimum of a two week period, the child exhibits at least 10 of the following traits, including all of those asterisked. Joanne Whitmore suggests that they may be underachieving:

- Exhibits poor test performance *
- Is achieving at or below grade-level expectations in one or all basic skill areas, *
- Turns in daily work that is frequently incomplete or poorly done, *
- Has superior comprehension and retention of concepts when interested, *
- Exhibits vast gap between qualitative level of oral and written work, *
- Possesses an exceptionally large repertoire of factual knowledge,
- Exhibits vitality of imagination and is creative,
- Exhibits persistent dissatisfaction with work accomplished,
- Seems to avoid trying new activities
- Seems to avoid tasks that may result in imperfect performance
- Shows initiative in pursuing self-elected interests at home,
- Has a wide range of interests and special expertise in an area of investigation and research, *
- Evidences low self esteem*
- Tendencies to withdraw or to be aggressive in the classroom,
- Does not function comfortably or constructively in a group of any size
- Shows acute sensitivity and perceptions related to self, others and life in general,
- Tends to set unrealistic expectations with goals being too low or too high,
- Dislikes practice work, or drill, memorization and mastery,
- Is easily distracted,
- Is unable to focus attention and concentrate efforts on the task at hand.
- Has an indifferent or negative attitude toward school
- Resists teacher efforts to motivate students in the class.
- Resists teacher efforts to manage behaviour in class
- Has difficulty in peer relationships;
- Maintains few friendships.

Reasons for Underachievement

“A highly gifted year 8 student was asked why he was not handing in his school work for checking. He replied, “Beam me up Scotty, there’s no intelligent life here.” He went on to explain that he saw no reason to do homework for teachers who couldn’t understand the complexity or the diversity of his responses.” S. Lind (1998)

These feelings are typical of gifted students at risk of underachievement in schools. The reasons that children underachieve are as numerous and as varied as the students themselves.

Following are some incidents from classrooms that have resulted in student underachievement:

a. Students who learn easily and readily and often finish their work well before others in the class, may be given more work which is not challenging. Bright children do not need “more of the same”, as the gifted child learns that finishing early will bring a reward of doing more work than their peers they will simply learn to slow down. They may regress and complete only what is expected and they may become bored and absorbed in a private world of their own.

b. A teacher’s decision may conflict with a student’s high level of idealism and sense of justice. If the teacher consistently refuses to discuss the issue, the child may become resentful and “turn off” school. Gifted children require the opportunity to express their opinions in a meaningful way where their thoughts and ideas will be considered.

Some researchers have found psycho-social factors consistently associated with discrepant achievement and have concluded that distinctive personality and behaviour patterns exist.

Whitmore (1996) suggested the following characteristics consistently discriminate between the two groups:

1. *Academic anxiety*, which the achiever can control more consistently and direct toward achieving goals.

There is no doubt that a high level of anxiety is associated with gifted children constantly striving for perfection. Creating an awareness of the causes of this anxiety can assist students to cope. Some of the causes of this anxiety may be: the perfection syndrome, pressure to perform, very high expectations of self, poor time management skills, lack of goal setting and inefficient and ineffective study techniques.

2. *Self-Value*, with the underachiever feeling less adequate and confident, pessimistic and personally and intellectually deficient.

It is necessary to counsel the students both individually and in a support group to build self esteem. It may be a good idea to include supportive parents in this process. Encouraging the students to focus on their gifts and strengths rather than their weaknesses, sharing their achievements both within and outside school with their peers

and developing a pride in themselves and their achievements is necessary to assist in overcoming low self esteem and poor self confidence.

3. Authority Relations, with the underachiever acting defensively either through compliance, evasion, blind rebellion and negativism which may reflect a displaced hostility toward a significant adult in the child's world.

The underachiever, may be frustrated at their limited achievements and resent anyone discussing their academic achievements. Their self esteem is low, they are trying to protect their self concept and in order to maintain this, they act in a defensive manner.

4. Interpersonal relationships, with the underachiever tending to feel rejected and isolated while sometimes giving the impression of outward composure.

Gifted children who are underachieving, tend to feel disappointed in themselves, as this occurs their self esteem and self confidence lowers resulting in a false belief that they are worthless. In many cases the clever child is able to hide these feelings and act as if all is fine, however, The lowered self esteem, in turn, impacts on relationships and friendships and effects all interpersonal relationships.

5. Independence-dependence conflict, another interpersonal trait where the underachiever appears uninterested, apathetic, or critical of others.

Once again this trait is used to protect the child's self concept. The underachiever may suffer from a fear of failure but if they do not attempt to gain an understanding of the task at hand then they cannot fail and their self image remains in tact.

6. Activity Patterns, with the underachiever more interested in social activities than academics.

During adolescence, peers and social acceptance become more important to the adolescent than academic ventures. They have a great need for acceptance by peers and the development of interpersonal relationships. For the underachieving child, who is desperate for acceptance it is common to focus on social activities in order to gain a positive self concept.

7. Goal Orientation, sees that underachiever setting unrealistic goals that perpetuate a sense of failure.

Other researchers also recognize similar personality and social factors contributing to underachievement. Purkey (1990) noted that these children often lack self-confidence and perseverance, fail to express themselves adequately, have a poor belief system and are unable to establish good social relationships. Clark (1999) suggested inadequate motivation, social pressure or maladjustment, poor educational stimulation and problems in the home environment may add to some of the reasons why gifted children may fail to measure up academically.

The etiology behind underachievement is that children are not born as underachievers, underachieving is a learned behaviour.

Factors that impact on underachieving gifted children

Underachievement is complex and there are two main areas of the student's life which impacts on underachievement: The family and the school.

The child's family may have a poor family morale, family disruption, the parent/s may be overprotective, they may be authoritarian or excessively permissive and there may be inconsistencies between parents.

The school factors which may impact on the child's performance include: the schools climate, inflexible classrooms and busy work, competitive classrooms, negative expectations, unrewarding curriculum and matching efforts with outcomes as this limits performance and stifles creativity.

Strategies to assist underachieving gifted children

Many strategies have been put in place to cater for the needs of gifted learners, schools incorporate compacting, pre and post testing in classes, appropriate pacing of content, subject and year acceleration, advanced classes, student-centred learning and enrichment activities and still some children underachieve.

Attempts at reversing the patterns of underachievement have produced mixed results.

Counseling is the most widely used technique. General counseling is used to assist students to deal with any problems that they choose to discuss and focused counseling aimed directly at assisting students achieve higher grades.

Educational intervention classes with special instruction for underachievers have varied in their approach, content, delivery methods and assessment. The researchers concluded that placing gifted underachievers in classes of equally able achievers can be beneficial, particularly in infants, primary and middle school years.

Intervention programs

When deciding the best course of action for intervention for at-risk children, educators must firstly investigate where the problem lies- in the system or in the child or within the child's immediate environment or in some combination of these.

All intervention actions must involve the educator showing respect for the student, for who they are, accepting their feelings rather than judging them for their actions. The educator needs to make plans with the student and not for them. The educator will also need to prepare the system to facilitate the needs of the child and then to put in place a program for the students to succeed.

During this process it is important to keep in mind that the goal of this intervention is to encourage students to not only be successful in a school setting but also throughout their life.

When providing an intervention program for gifted underachievers Dr Linda Silverman suggests the following:

1. Identify underachievement early.
2. Obtain individual diagnosis.

3. Interview parents, asking questions like:
 - a. When did they see the problem beginning?
 - b. What is their opinion on the causes of the problem?
 - c. What is the child's temperament at home? Can the child be difficult at home?
 - d. What does the child do outside school and what are their interests?
4. Interview the student, asking questions like:
 - a. What classes do you enjoy the most and why?
 - b. What classes do you enjoy the least and why?
 - c. Complete a list of the students gifts/talents, strengths, weaknesses, interests, likes, dislikes.
 - d. What could be done to make things better by the school and the student's family.
 - e. What are the students short and long term goals and aspirations
5. Devise a plan of action with the student, parents, teachers and counsellors.
6. Monitor the student's progress regularly through checks on performance and interviews with the student as well as the parents and teachers.

The objectives of the intervention program may be to:

- *Reduce self-degrading comparisons with high achievers and improve the students self esteem and self-concept.
- *Learn to accept themselves through acceptance of others with similar problems
- *Enjoy intellectual stimulation through a student centred curriculum based on student interests and strengths
- *Acquire a sense of genuine success and to
- *Develop social skills and potential for leadership.

In conclusion

Overachievement is far easier to explain than underachievement. Overachievement may simply be an illusion resulting from under prediction or measurement error whereas underachievement can only partially be explained in terms of measurement error.

Some children's abilities are indeed over estimated, but there are others who perform inadequately at school. It is reasonable to hypothesize that any number of personality and environmental factors can thwart productivity or performance and produce the same signs of failure at school.

The underlying causes can vary greatly and so curing the problem may also lie in ones ability to define the problems.

Underachievement should be regarded as a single symptom representing diverse etiologies. These may include:

1. A students whose abilities were overestimated
2. A student who has an inadequate specific aptitude
3. A student who does not have the necessary drive, mental health, meta-learning habits, or personality supports.
4. A student who lacks the proper nurturance at home, school or in their community.

5. A student who sinks into mediocrity through a series of misfortune beyond his control.

Thus the five factors that link potential to fulfillment are also clues to potential and failure. These five factors that mesh into excellence include general ability (IQ), Spatial ability or talents, non-intellective factors such as ego, strength and values, environmental factors such as home, school and the community and chance factors that include unpredictable events.

Success will depend upon a combination of these traits whereas failure will result from a single deficit. This forms the relationship between promise and fulfillment. Tannenbaum (1994)

This may explain the inconsistencies in research findings on the nature and needs of these underachieving gifted children.

It is recommended that any intervention program should involve:

- *Trying the child in the gifted program for a probationary period,
- *Providing individual tutoring/ mentoring,
- *Providing group support,
- *Providing counselling when necessary,
- *Teaching the student and about his/her preferred learning style,
- *Teaching the student about his/her strengths,
- *Teaching the students to compensate for weaknesses,
- *Engaging the parent who is most like the child as a support system,
- *Focusing on the students interests and aspirations to make school interesting,
- *Finding an advocate for the students amongst his/her teachers and
- *Explaining the students needs to the family.

Research:

Background information

All students at this selective high school were considered to be gifted children as they had all been tested as a part of their entrance exam and all had very high IQ levels.

As in all schools, someone has to come last, last in tests, last in assignment marks and even last in the class or worse still the year. This led to a group of students believing that they were not gifted and not at all bright and there had been some mix up in their entrance scores and they really didn't belong in a selective high school.

Every time they took a test or submitted work their self-esteem took a battering and they began to develop a defeatist attitude that was self fulfilling. Comments like, "I am going to come last anyway," became a reality and a group of students began to form what is termed a "tail" in each class. Often it was the same group of students in every class.

These were students who, if at a comprehensive high school would have been achieving in the top 10% of the state. The students, who had never had the opportunity of achieving at this level amongst a peer group found this impossible to believe because they could only judge their success by those around them.

It was a necessity that something needed to be done to reverse this self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Intervention was a necessity.

Identification strategies..

The identification of underachieving gifted and talented children can be a difficult task. It is important to make the process of identification in schools a simple one that is always open to include additional children as they are identified. The obvious underachievers are easily spotted but that danger lies in the students who conform and complete the bare minimum with their under achievement going unnoticed.

The following is a simple concept that involves the entire staff in the process of identification. A teacher may have difficulty identifying an underachieving gifted child but can usually tell you if a child is not achieving their potential in their classrooms.

Teachers were asked to, over a period of three weeks observe their years 9 and 10 students and use Whitmore’s checklist to note students whom they believed were underachieving.

These names were then collected and collated into a whole school data base:

Name	English	Maths	Science	Art	PE/PD/H	Music	D&T	HSIE	Leadership	Other	Total
Fred					x						1
Alice	x		x	x	x	x	x				6
Tony		x		x		x					3
Ian	x	x	x						x	x	5
Drew					x			x			2
Wima		x				x	x	x			4
Sonya	x			x					x		3
Julie			x		x						2

If students were underachieving in three or more subjects they were admitted to the program. There were 36 students identified by educators throughout years 9&10 as underachieving and 2 students were identified by parents.

This database was distributed to head teachers to discuss it further with staff and this usually incurs additions to the list. Further testing can be carried out or this list can be used as a starting point in the identification process.

Information session and opportunities

Once identified, the children then need to be spoken to individually. Here the counsellor can explain that this program is not a punishment but a chance to get back on

track and work in an area of their own interest. At this point the student may choose not to be involved, in this instance their progress will require close monitoring.

For those who choose to be involved in the program, the next step is a meeting of the support team. The support team will consist of eight students who were identified as underachievers, within this team each student is given a partner of the same sex with similar interests, whose progress they will be responsible for.

This leadership/ mentoring role is used to develop interpersonal relationships as well as a sense of social responsibility as well as a sense of worth as they assist their partner. This is based on a program developed by Dr Nicholas Colangelo in Chicago in 1996.

Organisation

After the children have had the process explained a letter of explanation is also sent to the parents and an invitation to attend the information sessions.

The program organisation will involve students and parents attending information evenings that were developed specifically to target the remediation of the factors identified as influencing underachievement. By having both the parents and students present both groups will receive a consistent message.

An additional bonus is the parents and students can both network with peers in the same situation, this allows them to share concerns, and problem solving ideas.

The meeting of students with like minds allowed, as well as social opportunity, the learning of skills to support the realization of their abilities and the conversion of gifts into talents. It gave the students the opportunity to build friendships and a support network to assist them cope with the pressures of simply being gifted.

Concurrently, the students are counselled individually and meet with their small group once a week to support each other and to discuss issues that have arisen relating to their academic achievement.

As a reward, at the end of the training evenings the students will begin a research task on a topic of their own choosing. Joseph Renzulli's Revolving-Door Model is used. Here the students design their own research task and select a mentor to work with. They draw up a learning contract and are given some school time to work on their project. When the project is completed it is assessed and the student may return to normal lessons or if their underachievement has been addressed, the student may design another contract to work through with a new mentor.

Focus of the Training Evenings

Some of these topics may be examined and discussed over a number of sessions.

- *Building self esteem and self concept
- *Being a perfectionist
- *Time Management and organisational skills
- *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation
- *Goal Setting
- *Refinement of Study Skills
- *Dealing with "The System"

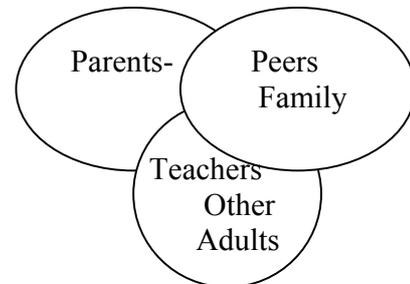
Building self esteem and self concept

Self-confidence is a belief you have that you possess good qualities which are valuable to yourself and others. It is how good you feel about yourself.

Liking oneself sometimes isn't easy, even for adults, but it is very important in having self confidence that it comes from the heart.

The people who impact on our self confidence are:

1. Parents/Family
2. Parent
3. Teachers & other adults



Some students have parents who think they are wonderful, others, may be overly critical. There are parents who are too busy or too tired but most are combinations of these. Parents who are critical risk destroying their child's self esteem. Parents are far from perfect and sometimes no matter what they say they cannot win. Students need to make suggestions to parents on ways they can support them and help build their self-confidence.

What your friends and peers think of you and the opinions that others have about you are essential in the development of your self-confidence. Consider ways that students can ensure their peers do not undermine their self-confidence.

Any attempt at doing something must be viewed as a victory. The worst failure in life is to not have tried at all. Students must learn not to limit themselves because of fear of failure. If students do fail, they must learn from the experience and move on. If students fail a test, they must view their mistakes as simply errors or signposts that tell them they are going the wrong way and guide them into a new direction. To make the most of this signpost (failure) the student must take the time to correct their mistakes so they do not repeat them.

Some students use failure as an excuse and say things like "I didn't study because I am just going to fail anyway". This is an example of negative self talk and is a symptom of a low self esteem. As students work on becoming achievers they must talk like achievers.

Some students suffer from a fear of failure and others a fear of success as they think that their friends won't like them any more or they may think that if they succeed, they will have quality work expected from them all of the time.

It is much easier for us to recognise our own weaknesses. Successful adults usually know their strengths and weaknesses and learn to make the best of the talents they have.

Students need to commit themselves and try a little harder than they think they can and they will stand out above the rest.

The following poem always gets an emotive response and allows immediate discussion.

All Dressed Up

By Joe Wayman from "If you promise not to Tell"

I want to wear my orange shirt,
The one with yellow patches.
"OK," says Mum, "and choose some pants.
But pick a pair that matches."

"All right" I say, and grab the plaid,
The purple and the blue,
I like this pair the very best,
Mum says she likes it too.

Now I need a pair of socks,
These will be just right,
The red ones with a touch of green,
I like them cause their bright.

Now I'm dressed up, all decked out,
Looking good from head to toe,
I dash into the kitchen,
Just as Mum yells, "Time to go!"

Mum looks at me and smiles,
She's so very proud,
Even though my choices,
Are just a little loud.

She straightens out my collar,
And I hear her gently say,
"You remind me of a rainbow,
On a rainy, rainy day."

Being a Perfectionist

Informing the students that a part of their problem was the fact that some of them were perfectionists brought an air of relief to both the students and parents.

The frustration felt at not being able to complete the work to what they consider to be a satisfactory level in the allotted time meant that some students decided it was best not to attempt the task at all.

The students wanted to know exactly what to do, how to do it, how it was to be presented, where to get the information and all of the specific details even though the task may have involved students learning through a discovery approach. If a detailed rubric was attached, it was viewed as helpful but stifled the creativity and divergent thinking that may have resulted from a more open ended task.

During the information sessions the students were encouraged to develop the focus and persistence needed to complete the task successfully.

Time Management and organisational skills

Organising notes, folders and books to study for a test or begin a project takes time and effort, but it pays off in the long term as you become better students.

Being organised helps you to make better use of your time and time, once lost can never be regained.

During this session the students and parents participate in a workshop that firstly analyses what students do with their time. They are then taught how to draw up a weekly time management plan. For many students this is the first time that they have had to roster their time and allocate activities to certain times of the day to ensure that all gets done. This process takes pressure off and relieves frustration for both the parents and students by ensuring that everyone knows that all tasks will be completed before the due date.

Students are also taught how to use a study diary, write “to do” lists and how to plan assignments so that all of the necessary resources have been gathered before the time comes to write the task up.

A discussion on how to save time and use it efficiently as well as setting priorities all ensure that frustration levels are lowered.

Being organised and learning how to timetable and manage your time are skills you need to learn and just like reading and writing, these are skills that you will use throughout your entire life.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Motivation is the desire to do something. Hopes and dreams are the building block of motivation. We are all motivated to do many things, some motivations, like hunger are very basic, other types of motivation require more maturity.

It is easy to feel motivated to do something that interests you but sometimes we have to find the motivation to do things that we don't want too. Students have to want to achieve. Motivation is important in becoming an achiever. Self-motivation is the hardest of all.

Perhaps motivation can be achieved through administering rewards. In becoming achievers, students need to create their own external motivators rather than waiting for parents or teachers to do it. Initially extrinsic rewards such as a social outing, a break from study or physical exercise may be used to encourage work on a task. Achievers take on the responsibility of accomplishing goals and tasks, even those that they do not really like.

With success in academia and achieving ones potential comes the intrinsic motivations of knowing what a job well done feels like, knowing the sweetness of success and gaining a desire to do it again.

When considering their motivation level, the students also need to think about ability and effort. “I can is 100 times more important than IQ” Caroline Coyle(1995). In Japan, the teachers believe that everyone has the ability to succeed at school if they put in the effort. Effort and hard work will pay off in the end. Work ethic needs to be closely linked to motivation.

A range of people can be used as special sources of motivation and these may include: mentors, role models, study partners and peer tutors.

Goal Setting

Goal setting is deciding on basic plans for your life that you will strive to achieve. It is hard to know if you are achieving if you don't know what you want to achieve. Goals and dreams work hand in hand. You have to have the dream or vision in order to know what goals to pursue. You then need a plan to accomplish your goals. It is the hard work when working on your plans and goals that can turn your dream into a reality.

Children need to learn to set goals from an early age, they need to also learn that setting a goal does not necessarily mean that you will achieve it. Children have to be taught to set goals as well as a plan of action describing how they can work toward achieving their goals. These goals may be short term, intermediate, long term or career oriented goals.

Students need to develop smart goals that can be used by them as a tool for future planning. Goals that are set must be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time focused.

Most achievers set goals for themselves regularly, for goals act as a blueprint for what they do in their lives. In following this blueprint, students and parents can set goals that will ensure academic and life long success.

Refinement of Study Skills

Studying is hard work! Many students are unwilling to put in the effort that studying requires. Students need to make a commitment to do what it takes to develop the study skills that you need.

The explicit teaching of the meta-cognitive processes, cognitive organisers, Blooms Taxonomy, holistic learning, preferred learning styles and a range of study skills that promote higher order thinking skills are a necessity to promote academic achievement. Meta-cognition is thinking about thinking, in studying how we think, we also study the way in which we learn. In considering how we learn we should be able to recognise our strengths and build on them and our weaknesses and overcome them

Systems also need to be put in place that provide students with cognitive assistants to help them recall key concepts. Memory aids may include summarizing skills, note-taking, mind maps, flow charts, mnemonics, acronyms, regular review sessions, study notes, study guides and post it notes. They need structures to develop these concepts further, structures that include Socratic thinking, study groups, philosophical discussion and activities involving higher order thinking skills.

The more the students understand learning styles and theories, the more likely it is that they will move toward achieving their potential.

Dealing with “The System”

School is a system. All systems have rules and regulations that everyone follows in order for the system to run smoothly for the majority of its people. Unfortunately, sometimes these rules seem pretty senseless, and some students don't understand why they have to follow them.

On occasion students are requested to do an assignment covering information that they already know, it seems senseless, but sometimes it is just the way the system works.

Some students refuse to do the work because it is too boring or because they already know the answers.

These students are not achievers at school because they do not follow the rules of the system.

Other students may have spaces in their learning where they have “missed” or “have not grasped” a specific concept. Students need to identify their academic deficiencies and develop a plan of action to overcome them.

Whilst the students are being counselled and trained the teachers also require professional development on how to assist these students achieve their potential. The quality teaching model is a major initiative for all state school teachers being implemented by the NSW Department of Education in NSW public schools beginning in 2004.

Teachers core business is that of teaching. Educational research as presented in the *Quality teaching in New South Wales public schools: Discussion paper*, recognises the importance of this. The importance of delivering high quality teaching is a central challenge for all teachers as it promotes improvement in student learning outcomes. (Hill and Rowe, 1998.)

Because pedagogy is closely correlated to improving student outcomes there needs to be a major focus on quality teaching in all teaching programs

What is the Quality Teaching Model? (Extracted from “Quality Teaching in NSW public schools Discussion Paper” 2003)

The model of pedagogy presented in the discussion paper has three dimensions that represent classroom practices that have been linked to improved student outcomes both within schools and within the universities teaching programs.

These three dimensions are:

1. Pedagogy that promotes high levels of intellectual quality.

Intellectual quality refers to pedagogy focused on producing deep understanding of important, substantive concepts, skills and ideas. Such pedagogy treats knowledge as something that requires active construction and requires students to engage in higher-order thinking and to communicate substantively about what they are learning.

2. Pedagogy that establishes a high quality learning environment.

Quality learning environment refers to pedagogy that creates classrooms where students and teachers work productively in an environment clearly focused on learning. Such pedagogy sets high and explicit expectations and develops positive relationships between teachers and students and among students.

3. Pedagogy that generates significance by connecting students with the intellectual demands of their work.

Significance refers to pedagogy that helps make learning more meaningful and important to students. Such pedagogy draws clear connections with students’ prior knowledge and identities, with contexts outside of the classroom, and with multiple ways of knowing or cultural perspectives.

Each of the three dimensions of the NSW model of pedagogy is comprised of a number of elements.

Intellectual quality	Quality learning environment	Significance
Deep knowledge	Explicit quality criteria	Background knowledge
Deep understanding	Engagement	Cultural knowledge
Problematic knowledge	High expectations	Knowledge integration
Higher-order thinking	Social support	Inclusivity
Meta-language	Students' self-regulation	Connectedness
Substantive communication	Student direction	Narrative

Extracted from "Quality Teaching in NSW public schools Discussion Paper" 2003

The students are counselled individually and meet with their small groups concurrently once a week to discuss issues that have arisen. These meetings are often informal and in a social setting e.g. a pizza lunch with serious chat time.

Findings related to academic success

The success of the intervention program was outstanding. 34 out of 38 students showed significant academic improvement across every subject.

This could be attributed to many factors. The non confrontational parental involvement, the building of self esteem, the special interest shown by teachers, the opportunity to work on a special interest project of their choosing, the teamwork and collegial environment, the academic responsibility for a peer, a number or a combination of things.

Whatever the reason for its success the students claimed that it was "fun" and they enjoyed being involved. They also stated that it wasn't extra work, but an enjoyable time with new friends. The firm but easygoing nature of the coordinator and counsellor who were involved every step of the way must not be undervalued as another person with a different personality may not have been able to achieve the same success with the students..

The other four students, two teams, showed academic improvement across three and four subjects and maintained their academic standing in their other subjects. These students were the only pairs who were friends with their partners before the intervention, perhaps this had some impact, perhaps it was something else, but still very successful.

The special interest projects that the students completed were outstanding.

One year nine boy had watched a television special on the ABC called "The Leaving of Liverpool" where England sent many children to Australia to find new homes and families, instead many were used on farms as slave labour.

He chose to complete primary research, interview any of the children, now adults, that he could find and discuss their plight. He wrote this up into a history book that was published and he won an historical research grant that allowed him to travel to England with his mother in the school vacation period to research how the families felt about sending their children or siblings to Australia. All of this from an underachiever who he was yet to begin year ten at school.

Unexpected social outcomes

The parents involved in the program were full of praise because of the things that they had learnt and been able to share with their children. They stated that the program

had given them an insight into their children's lives and an opportunity to support them and share in their lives.

The parents also found that they were able to develop a network of friends who were experiencing similar things with their children and they were able to share their problem solving techniques. Some families formed very strong bonds and friendships that continued for years to come.

The students who had been teamed with other children that they didn't initially know very well resulted in many strong friendships being formed. The students mentioned the "gut wrenching pain" that they felt if their partner didn't do as well as they had hoped. They felt this was a positive stress because it increased their desire to do well in order to help another person who had become a friend as well as a responsibility.

The students readily accepted their leadership and mentor responsibility.

The class groups of eight students developed their own identity and niche that was considered "cool" within the school and before the end of the year, the school had canvassed requests from year eight students and their parents, asking to be included in the program the following year.

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