

PAKISTANI UNDERACHIEVERS: BEHAVIOURAL CHARACTERISTICS AND EFFECTS OF AN INTERVENTION PROGRAMME

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The report presents the results of a study which was conducted during summer vacations on a small group of children ($N=17$) who were picked up by teachers as underachievers on the basis of the children's academic performance during the preceding nine months. An interactional programme was chalked out. The activities selected consisted of perceptual thinking and body movement exercises. Most of these activities involved commercially available toys, though some of the equipment was prepared locally. Ten behavioural characteristics of these underachievers were identified and monitored. The results of the intervention exercise showed that most of the children improved in behavioural characteristics like self-control and goal-directedness.

Underachievement is one of the major problems of Pakistani schools. The term underachievement has been variously defined, but in our context we are simply referring to children who, while obviously in the normal IQ range and with no apparent handicaps, are unable to cope with school work. A number of behavioural characteristics of such children have been noted. Clement (1966) compiled a list of six most frequently cited characteristics of underachievers as: (a) hyperactivity; (b) perceptual-motor impairments; (c) emotional instability; (d) general orientation defects; (e) disorder of attention; and (f) impulsivity. Evidence has been found in studies (Hallahan, Kaufman & Ball 1973; Keogh & Donlon 1972; Meichenbaum & Goodman 1971) that under-achieving children tend to be impulsive when compared with normal children. Kephart (1960) believes that the major characteristic of such children is their inadequacy in basic skills required in school learning, which he believes, is due to restricted environment affecting eye-hand coordination, temporal-spatial translation and form-perception. No research is, however, available to show the characteristics of Pakistani underachieving children.

In recent years a number of researchers have shown that something can be done to help the underachieving children. Feuerstein (1980) relates underachievement in school to cognitive deficient functions. Cognitive deficient functions are unplanned, impulsive and unsystematic and exploratory. They are characterized by: inadequacy in perceiving the existence of an actual problem and in subsequently defining the problem, impaired spontaneous comparative behaviour, episodic grasp of reality, impaired spatial organization, ego-centric communication modalities, deficiency of visual transport and deficiency in projecting visual relationship. However, appropriate cognitive functions are not missing from the repertoire but are underdeveloped, arrested or impaired. With proper intervention, they can be developed steadily.

Furth and Wachs (1975) attempted to put Piaget's theory in practice. The authors provided a multitude of stimulating activities. Their School for Thinking Project was conducted in Charleston, West Virginia, where emphasis was on stimulating the children to think for themselves by involving them in body movement and perceptual thinking games. This work provided the main framework of the latter part of the work being reported here. However, it was felt that before embarking upon such an intervention programme it will be necessary to observe the behaviour of underachievers for the categories of behaviour in which they stand out from the ordinary children.

Thus, the purpose of this study was two-fold:

- (a) To observe the various behavioural characteristics of Pakistani underachievers in the classroom setting.
- (b) To study the impact of interaction with toys and the body movement activities in a classroom situation and to find out if such activities would bring about any changes.

METHOD

Sample

Federal Government Girls' High School, No. 1, Aabpara, Islamabad, was selected for conducting this study. The majority

of pupils of this school were the children of the low paid government employees, such as drivers, peons, night-guards, clerks, etc. 34 students from 5 sections of grade 6 were identified as underachievers by their respective class teachers, on the basis of their performance in the class during the past nine months. The criteria of class work, as defined by the teachers, consisted of performance on the class tests, children's response to teachers questioning during lessons and the quality of the classwork and homework of the children. The underachievers, according to the teachers were doing poorly in class tests, not answering the teachers' questions concerning the contents of lesson, slow in doing classwork and irregular in doing their homework. Their written work was considered messy and carelessly done.

Of these 34 girls, only 17 were finally selected for the experiment. The children selected were those who lived at a walking distance from the school and needed no transport to reach school. This was done due to the fact that this work was planned to be carried out during the summer vacations, and almost all children not living in the vicinity had to use public transport. It was felt that the girls would not be allowed to do this by their parents.

The average age of the group was 12 years. Thus these children were 2 years older than the expected age of 10 years for grade 6. Of the 17 girls, 5 were Christians and 12 were Muslims. Their parents' occupations fell into the categories of sweepers, gardeners, peons and clerks. The average income of the families of these children was Rs. 1,000 or less. The average number of siblings in their families ranged from 5 to 7. The girls in the sample were either the oldest child in the family or were oldest amongst the female children.

Procedure

The group attended the summer programme for a period of 24 days, starting from June 15, 1982. The children attended school four days a week from 9 a.m. to 12 noon. The total hours of work put in by the children was 72 hours of the summer vacations keeping in view off days for Eid (religious holiday) and family vacations during which the children went to their villages. The children worked in small groups of four to five

students. The groups were not fixed and depending upon the children's choice were organized from day to day.

Being a study of the classroom behaviour where the number of children involved was small, the behavioural observations for each child were recorded at the end of every school day. These observations were recorded without any particular framework, as the researcher wanted to develop a framework based on the behaviour of Pakistani children. A separate file for each child was maintained with details of her daily activity. After a week's observation, a pattern of behaviour began to emerge exhibited by all the pupils in various situations. This provided an indigenous framework for further work of this study.

Intervention Programme

The kinds of activities involved were: visual thinking and memory; space orientation; reflective thinking; communication games; body movements and activities like drawing, art work with plasticine and studying atlas, traffic charts and calendar. Following is a brief description of each of these activities (for details, see Chowdhri, 1982).

Visual Thinking: For visual thinking the activities emphasised part-whole and figure-ground relationship. The material used was peg-board and coloured pegs, blocks of various geometrical shapes, blocks with pictures on them and designed coloured tiles. The tasks varied, ranging from the simplest to the most complex. Shape and form were compared in the first variation. In the second variation the children constructed the patterns and in the third variation they constructed them from memory after having seen the original.

Space Orientation: The space orientation activities were divided into three parts: (a) spatial orientation relative to one's own body and one's own movement, (b) topological space with concepts such as on, above, below, up, down and between and (c) external stable system of reference, such as the points of the compass. The children were made to realise the space orientation with different movements of the body in the four directions. Following a certain movement, what was previously *right* will

become *left*, or *front* will become *back*. The parameters of *up*, *down*, *between*, etc., were introduced by manipulating the objects in the classroom. The compass was used to indicate the four directions. In this context questions were put to the students, "Can you stand facing North?"; "You are facing East, which direction should you turn to face North?"

Reflective Thinking: Reflective thinking activities were based on comprehending the main ideas, details, the sequential order of relating things, following directions and predicting outcomes. The copies of daily newspapers were used for these purposes. Various news stories were cut out. They were passed around to the pupils and each one of them wrote down what she thought could be the heading of the passage. Later, their headings were compared with the actual heading and a discussion of the differences of opinion between the newspaper heading and those of the pupils would take place. In another activity newspaper headlines were cut out and each child gave her idea of what the headline is about. The headlines included news like national or international problems, current affairs, show-cause notices, employment information.

Communication Games: Communicating one's own ideas is as important as correctly deciphering what the other person means. Learning to be attentive is an important skill for success in school learning. Peg-board communication game was played where the experimenter gave the verbal instruction such as, "Place a red peg in the first hole on the first row". Another example of the instructions that followed is, "Now place green peg in the top row, third hole from the left side". The level of difficulty was adjusted according to the level of individual students.

Body Movement: The body movement activities involved the use of straight and slanting walking rails, balance board and various body movement games, e.g., in the body lift game the child was made aware of movements of different parts of the body. The experimenter touched different parts of child's body without the child seeing the hand of the experimenter, for example, right foot, right knee and right elbow. The task of the child was to raise the parts of the body in the particular sequence.

When the child was able to respond in the same sequence, the experimenter touched the two parts simultaneously and the child gave immediate response. The tasks were made difficult when the opposite sides (left arm-right leg) were touched. Bimanual circles on the chalk-board encouraged the bilateral coordination of the arms. The child held a piece of chalk in his hand against the chalk-board and moved her arms in circular motion. Later, both fists were used at the same time and the children were encouraged to interrupt or change the direction of the movement of one arm while continuing the motion with the second arm.

SCORING

After identifying above ten dimensions, follow-up daily observations for each child were limited to the judgement of these dimensions of behaviour. The observation of each child's behaviour was recorded daily and any change in his behaviour was particularly noted. The behaviour of the child during the initial period served as control for the particular child. At end of the study the report of each child was evaluated in terms of the extent of change which had taken place during this period.

RESULTS

Behaviour of Underachievers

The behaviour pattern of underachievers was classified in 10 dimensions, which are described below:

1. Impulsiveness: Springing to action without understanding the nature of activity to be carried out.
2. Impaired planning behaviour: Not differentiating between means and goals.
3. Inability to follow instructions: Not paying attention to the details of the instructions.
4. Inflexibility: Tackling the problem in a rigid manner. Sticking to one way of doing something, even if it was obviously incorrect.

5. Rote memorization: Trying to memorize every thing rather than understanding it.
6. Insequential conversation: Missing words and skipping over ideas randomly.
7. Giving up easily: Not putting one's heart into the work, giving up on encountering slightest difficulty.
8. Dealing with tasks in piecemeal fashion: Inability to take an integrated and organized view of two or more sources of information.
9. Inattentiveness: Not fully concentrating on the task at hand, getting distracted by the slightest sound or even a change in weather.
10. Inadequate sense of direction: Inability to use a frame of reference for indicating the location of familiar objects and places.

Change in behaviour

Table 1 shows the extent of change in the classroom behaviour of underachievers as the result of the experimental intervention.

Table 1

Extent of Improvement in the Behaviour of Children ($N=17$)

Dimensions of Behaviour	Number of children showing		
	Marked Improvement	Some Improvement	No Improvement
Impulsiveness	10	7	—
Impaired planning behaviour	17	—	—
Inability to follow instructions	17	—	—
Inflexibility	17	—	—
Rote memorization	—	17	—
Insequential conversation	17	—	—
Giving up easily	5	6	6
Dealing with activities in piecemeal fashion	12	5	—
Inattentiveness	5	12	—
Inadequate sense of direction	12	5	—

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This was a small observational study that began with the classroom behaviour of 17 underachievers of grade 6. The group was small and was not compared with any control-group. However, for one part of the study, effect of intervention on the initial behaviour of each child served as a control. The study has an advantage that the children's behaviour in classroom was studied without any preconceived notions.

The study showed the major behaviour characteristics of Pakistani underachievers, which may be useful for further research using larger samples.

The study also shows that any stimulus when selected and organised properly can be efficiently interpreted by an underachiever. It appears that this group was probably not lacking the ability to learn in school, but they were using strategies that prevented them from properly organising the incoming information and adequately representing the outcome of this information.

In the end it may be suggested that similar studies need to be conducted for a longer period of time and the outcomes be compared with the control group. It is also important to comprehend the life style of the underachievers outside the school. The understanding of the roles of children in our culture, especially those of girls, appeared to be an important variable for any future action.

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