

Helping children achieve more in school

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Larkmead School. Credit: CC-BY-SA-2.5,2.0,1.0

Not all children do well in school, despite being intellectually capable. Whilst parental relationships, motivation and self-concept all have a role to play, a recent study published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* shows that children's learning strategy is key for academic success.

The study showed that [students](#) with normal scores on intellectual tests but that have poor grades in secondary school are also not as good at acquiring and retaining information, or later applying it.

Lead researcher of the study and professor at the University of Alicante in Spain, Juan Castejón, concludes that underachieving students appear to employ all of the learning [strategies](#) considered, but to a lesser extent

than normal and overachieving students, and this seems to be the key for [academic success](#).

"The underachievers group of students also has poorer attitudes to learning goals, poorer relationships with their parents, and lower emotional stability than their peers," says Castejón, "but learning strategies showed the strongest relationship with achievement."

By comparing underachievers with normal- or over-achievers, the work brings new insight on how educational interventions may help those in academic difficulty.

"At the moment, Spain has a school drop-out rate of more than twice the EU average," says Castejón. "We believe that underachieving students could be contributing to this, so it is really important to guide teachers, counsellors and parents on how they can help."

Learning strategies can respond well to behavioural interventions, so there is hope that with the right help from teachers and carers, underachievement is reversible. Castejón believes that teachers should focus on reinforcing these learning strategies and goals, and promote autonomy and responsibility in their students.

"Self-regulating models in which goals, strategies and self-concept are integrated would help improve [academic achievement](#)," concludes the researcher.

"It is also important that teachers and parents are positive towards, and encourage, their children," Castejón explains, "as better self-esteem in our kids leads to better efforts and achievements."

To define underachievement, the researchers looked at the mismatch between expected achievement and actual achievement. For this, they

took standardized measures of each child's intellectual abilities to define academic expectation, and of their school grades, to define academic achievement. The researchers also looked at a range of behaviours including learning strategies and goals, and relationships with their parents and peers.

But it was when they explored various aspects of learning strategies that they had insights. Learning strategies involve selection, organization and information processing, creative and critical thinking, information recovery and transference, in addition to planning, evaluation, and information control and monitoring.

"The discovery of the importance of learning strategies is vital in developing new ways to help our children fulfil their academic potential," says Castejón.

"Our work shows the need to understand not only the causes of underachievement, but also how they differ with overachievement," says Castejón, "so we can target interventions inspired by how overachievers use their behaviours to excel," he explains.

What this study also highlights is how research can help professional development and training of teachers, in Spain, and probably in other countries.

"At the moment, there is a tendency for educational research and teacher-training to be completely separate, with little crossover of ideas," says Castejón. "What we need are more professionals who can cross the science-policy boundary, and use research to guide how we teach."

Castejón and his research group are continuing their studies to examine new possibilities. "We believe that there may be sub-groups of students with particular characteristics within the underachievers," says Castejón.

"We want to look at them more thoroughly, which will help us to really individualise our recommendations for these children."

More information: Juan L. Castejón et al, Differences in Learning Strategies, Goal Orientations, and Self-Concept between Overachieving, Normal-Achieving, and Underachieving Secondary Students, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01438](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01438)

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