# Identifying and supporting young adolescent academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8 classrooms

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Academic underachievement in young adolescents has been a concern for teachers, schools and systems for some time. In Australian schools, curriculum reforms and middle years programs have been implemented to improve the educational outcomes of young adolescents, and address underachievement, with limited continuity and consistency. This study used a mixed methods approach within a collective case study to investigate characteristics and practices of secondary school teachers when identifying and dealing with academic underachievers in Years 7 and 8. Findings revealed that teachers identified the following as primary indicators of an academic underachiever: literacy and numeracy barriers; absences; family background factors; and, a lack of engagement, participation and confidence in learning. These teachers implemented specific practices to help address student underachievement including attempting to improve pedagogical relationships, collaboration with colleagues, aides and parents, and adjusting and modifying curriculum. The findings showed that these practices were not consistently informed by learner-centred or middle years educational models, but tended to be practical responses provided to assist underachieving students participate in learning activities and assessment and to meet age and stage curriculum standards. Teachers believed their practices were negatively influenced and limited by lack of time, system support and resources. While recognising that academic underachievers had complex needs, the practices teachers employed in the classroom were generally remedial and did not necessarily encourage the development of learner confidence in their students.

## Introduction

The term academic underachiever is often used to describe students who display a broad range of characteristics, including students who are disengaged from learning or school (Thomas, 2013), and students labelled 'at risk' for a variety of reasons (Chadbourne, 2001; Luke et al., 2003). Underachieving students have included second language speakers, indigenous students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and those with low literacy and numeracy skills (Garrick & Keogh, 2010; Jha & Kelleher, 2006; Louden, et al., 2000; Luke et al., 2003). Underachieving students can also include students identified as gifted and talented and those with learning barriers (Bennett-Rappell & Northcote, 2016; Garrick & Keogh, 2010; Louden et al., 2000; Luke et al., 2003). Research into this area is important as studies by Benner (2011), McInerney and Smyth (2014), and Schulz and Rubel (2011), for example, have indicated that academic underachievement in young adolescents has been linked with pervasive and long lasting negative effects and impacts that can, over time, develop into negative trends going well beyond the classroom setting for the student.

Many young adolescents face additional challenges when moving from primary to secondary schooling, which can result in disengagement. These students may present with

complex background factors, demonstrate less engagement with schooling, and have literacy or numeracy challenges or other barriers to learning (The Centre for Adolescent Health, 2018). For these students, the transition between primary and secondary schooling systems may introduce new concerns with learning or consolidate existing trends and tendencies regarding poor learning outcomes and overall academic underachievement (Redmond et al., 2016). The study discussed in this paper explored how teachers in a regional setting identify young adolescent academic underachievers and the practices they used to support them in the classroom.

## Review of the literature

### Definition of academic underachievement

There are multiple factors accompanying academic underachievement that complicate its ready identification by teachers and professionals (Chukwu-Etu, 2009; Figg, Rogers, McCormick & Low, 2012; Reis & McCoach, 2000). Often this term has been explored as a subsidiary aspect of another educational field or issue that might focus on student disengagement, student gender or literacy and numeracy deficits and outcomes. Additionally, the term academic underachievers may be used to describe students who disengage from learning or school (Thomas, 2016), and students labelled 'at risk' for differing reasons (Chadbourne, 2001, Luke et al., 2003). Groups may include academic students with learning disabilities (Garrick & Keogh, 2010; Louden, et al., 2000), although many researchers exclude students with learning disabilities from operational definitions (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Carr, Borkowski and Maxwell (1991) noted that underachievement in the US has been a persistent and under-researched problem for decades and concluded that this might be because "underachievers are often under-identified and do not represent the most pressing problem facing classroom teachers" (p. 108). Underachievement also comprises a significant and concerning component of the literature on gifted and talented students (Bennett-Rappell & Northcote, 2016; Van Tassel-Baska, 2005). Underachieving students therefore form a diverse group and may include students from a wide range of backgrounds and contexts.

### Factors impacting on academic underachievement

Factors impacting on young adolescent academic achievement include the transition from primary to secondary schooling, literacy and numeracy barriers, frequent absences, wellbeing concerns, learner confidence, student engagement, and connection to and participation in learning (Skilling, 2014; Sprick, Alabiso & Yore, 2015). Academic underachievement may be influenced by specific learning needs that arise in young adolescence and increase in the transition from primary to secondary school. In most Australian schools, the transition between primary and secondary schools occurs when students experience the onset of puberty, undergoing significant physical changes and accompanying cognitive, social and emotional developments (Bahr, 2010; Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Cobbold, 2005). In addition to meeting the developmental needs of students in this age and stage, teaching students in Years 7 and 8 often presents the classroom teacher with other institutional and system challenges. These include teaching

large groups of students seen intermittently for relatively short periods of time across the week, and students with varying levels of ability and a disparate range of learning and wellbeing needs.

Literacy and numeracy difficulties have been highlighted as a concern for some years (Luke et al., 2003). Many resources have been channelled into programs to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes among young adolescents (Freebody, 2007; Luke et al., 2003). Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) and Honan (2010) have also highlighted the need for teachers to challenge and extend the literacy skills of students, by providing engaging and rigorous literacy practices that connect to the personal world and emerging individuality of young adolescents.

Balfanz (2016) has drawn attention to the correlation between student absences and academic achievement, with Sprick et al., (2015) noting that students missing up to 10 percent of the school year (for any reason) demonstrate poorer educational and long term outcomes in a range of areas. Wellbeing concerns such as mental health disorders, anxiety issues and bullying at school (Lacey, Cornell & Konold, 2017; The Centre for Adolescent Health, 2018) also impact on young adolescent academic achievement. Many studies have highlighted correlations between low achievement with lower levels of wellbeing, resilience and motivation (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Bernard, 2006; Fried & Chapman, 2012; Gilman, Dooley & Florell, 2006; Lacey et al., 2017; Redmond et al., 2016; Von Battenburg-Eddes & Jolles, 2013). More specifically, Gilman et al. (2006) noted correlations between a lack of hope and positive expectations for the future and poorer learning outcomes for adolescents in general. Fried and Chapman (2011) indicated links between motivation, engagement and positive achievement in young adolescents, while Lacey et al. (2017) noted a link between increased bullying and decreased achievement on school exam scores among Year 7 and 8 students attending schools with higher incidences of bullying. The report by Redmond et al. (2016) on young persons' wellbeing in the middle years has provided conclusive data on the increasing gap in academic achievement and other wellbeing indicators between marginalised and non-marginalised students in Year 8, compared to students in Year 4 and 6. These findings also confirm the difficulties arising in the transition to secondary school, noting the complex factors that impact on academic achievement, wellbeing and confidence of young adolescents (Redmond et al., 2016; The Centre for Adolescent Health, 2018).

Dweck's model of "fixed" or "growth mindsets" (Dweck, 2012, pp. 6-7) highlighted the significance of student self-belief to learner confidence and student responses to failure. High achieving students may be students who demonstrate strong learner confidence and a growth oriented mindset, which assists in over-riding academic setbacks or difficulties (Dweck, 1999; 2012; Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck & Gross, 2014), enabling students to overcome transitional barriers. Low levels of learner confidence and self-limiting beliefs present yet another hurdle for young adolescent academic underachievers (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Bernard, 2006).

## Middle years education and models of practice

Students in Year 7 and 8 benefit from learning programs specifically targeted to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents, both to address transitional concerns and to support the learning of students who might slip through the cracks (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007, 2012; Fried & Chapman, 2012; Jacobs, 2010; Pendergast et al., 2005, Pendergast, 2016; Rumble & Aspland, 2010). Some schools and systems have introduced middle years educational models of practice to address factors impacting on young adolescent academic achievement and engagement with learning (Pendergast, 2010; Pendergast, 2016). Many young adolescents find the Year 7 curriculum overly conceptual and general (Tadich, Deed, Campbell & Prain, 2007; Wiggins & McTighe, 2001) with pedagogies that are more restricted in range than those they encountered in primary school. Young adolescents benefit from curricula that are personally meaningful, include opportunities for autonomy and are connected to the community, or the student's life-world, allowing space for exploration of big concepts or ideas and the opportunity for self-expression (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2010). Middle years educational models seek to address these transitional challenges, including curriculum and pedagogical differences in the delivery of learning programs between primary and secondary schooling, reduced opportunities for informal contact between family and school (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Moni & Hay, 2011), and timetables and schedules which involve frequent student movement between subjects, classrooms and teachers (Sejnost, 2009; Smyth & McInerney, 2007).

In Australia, middle years models and reforms have been implemented inconsistently within various schools and systems in response to these concerns, to varying degrees of acceptance (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010). The introduction of new reforms that bring change or influence practice may be perceived to place extra demands on busy classroom teachers, and thus may not always be welcome at ground level. Furthermore, middle years models of practice have varied considerably in their implementation across schools and systems (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010).

## Policies and programs to address student underachievement

In addition to middle years educational reforms (Pendergast, 2016; Smyth & McInerney, 2007), programs and policies addressing student underachievement have included curriculum reform (Chadbourne, 2001; Luke et al., 2003; Paechter, 2000), changes to teacher education and professional standards (DEEWR, 2013), and changes to funding (Gonski, 2011; Smith, 2005). Alternatively, policies and programs have targeted identifying and supporting the specific needs of targeted groups such as ethnic minority groups, second language speakers, boys in education (Gorard & Smith, 2004), and students with learning disabilities (Jones & Myhill, 2004). In the US, these have included legislative acts such as *No Child Left Behind (NCLB), 2002* (US Department of Education, n.d), programs supporting substantial reform within the middle years (Carr et al., 1991; McCall, Evahn & Kratzer, 1992; Pendergast, 2010; Smyth & McInerney, 2007) and improved literacy and numeracy outcomes for underachieving youth from Hispanic or African American backgrounds (Jones & Myhill, 2004). The UK has cycled through various reforms

targeting different themes and groups in recent decades, including girls' underachievement, socio-economic disadvantage, minority cultural groups and boys' underachievement (Jones & Myhill, 2004; Lindsay & Muijs, 2006).

Until the introduction of the Gonski and Gonski 2.0 funding reforms (Doyle, 2017) and the introduction of a national curriculum in 2008 (Toner, 2013), policies and programs in Australia have appeared to follow similar trends of thought and theme, without the rigorous driving policy found in the US such as NCLB (Elkins & Poed, 2011; Lindsay & Muijs, 2006; US Department of Education, n.d.). Generally, Australian educational policy since the 1960s has centred on broad social justice themes, addressing educational concerns stemming from poverty and socio-economic disadvantage, indigenous educational outcomes, girls' education, boys' education, diverse learning issues, disability and inclusion (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997). In 2008, the introduction of the Australian Curriculum by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (Toner, 2013) ensured a standardised curriculum was implemented across all states and territories for students from early years to Year 12 (ACARA, 2015). For the first time in Australian schooling history, teachers could access national benchmarks for student achievement that did not vary across state, school or system and ensured the continuity of outcomes (Apple, 2005) and achievement levels for all Australian students. These system goals, outcomes and benchmarks have been reinforced and supported by national benchmarking literacy and numeracy assessments such as NAPLAN (Elkins & Poed, 2011).

While learner-centred practices and specific learning theories have been promoted for some time within teacher training programs and system policy statements, teachers, schools and systems have been mandated to implement and use Australian curriculum and state syllabus guidelines to rank achievement against subject curriculum standards (Luke et al., 2003). The focus in many schools was and still is on programs, reporting and assessment ranking student achievement using an A-E scale against year and stage benchmarks (Elkins & Poed, 2011). This mandated focus has not always assisted in the promotion of teacher practices formed on learner-centred curricula that are negotiated and adapted around the learning needs of the individual student (Beane, 2013; Campbell, Faulkner & Pridham, 2010; Dowden, 2007; Richardson, 2003).

Beyond these general positions and trends, teacher perspectives also influence the identification and support of underachieving students (DiCicco, Cook & Faulkner, 2016; Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Effective teacher practices have a significant influence on outcomes for young adolescents (Archambault, Janosz & Chouinard, 2012; Blumenfeld, 1992; DiCicco, Cook & Faulkner, 2016; Hattie, 2012; Kiefer, Alley & Ellerbrock, 2015; Shanks & Dowden, 2013; Tadich et al., 2007).

Dowden (2007) and Pendergast (2016), for example, claimed that secondary school teachers require a highly developed set of skills, knowledge and understanding to effectively address the developmental and learning needs of young adolescents. Teacher qualities and practices such as a focus on warm relationships, pedagogical caring (Attard, 2011; Kiefer, Alley & Ellerbrock, 2015; Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel, Muenks, McNeish &

Russell, 2017), a democratic style in the classroom, and student-centred learning (Guo, 2018), have been promoted as particularly appropriate and useful for teaching young adolescents in secondary school (DiCicco, Cook & Faulkner, 2016; Cornelius-White, 2007; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel et al., 2017). Furthermore, teacher practices used in middle years educational models, which encourage deep understanding, development of metacognitive and critical thinking and the connection of classroom learning to world and community, have also been linked with effective teaching for young adolescents (Beane, 2013; Beswick, Swabey & Andrews, 2008; Chadbourne, 2001; Dowden, 2007; Guo, 2018; Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006; Luke et al., 2003; Shanks & Dowden, 2013).

In summary, the literature demonstrates that teacher identification and utilisation of effective practices implemented to support young adolescent underachievers presents a complex and significant concern for Australian students, their families and their teachers, warranting further exploration and discussion. The following research questions were formulated to underpin the study and to provide a focus for the collection of data:

1. What characteristics and factors do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting?
2. What practices do teachers use to address academic underachievement in the classroom?

## Method

The study used a collective case study framework involving a mixed methods design. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) pointed out, mixed methods studies have become increasingly common in educational research. Mixed methods studies collect and combine different forms of data at different stages prioritising either quantitative or qualitative methods, depending on the research questions and design utilised (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Using both types of data enable the triangulation of results for findings (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008), allowing the development of rich narratives from qualitative data to enhance the quantitative results. This article discusses data from two different data instruments including: a questionnaire completed by 34 Catholic and State Secondary School teachers from the region; and a series of semi-structured interviews completed by 12 teacher participants recruited from participating schools (see Appendix A for the questionnaire and Appendix B for the protocol guide used for semi-structured interviews.) Following ethical approval, the first set of data were gathered from a questionnaire that investigated teacher perspectives when identifying and supporting underachieving students in Year 7 and 8. Data resulting from this questionnaire included qualitative and quantitative responses. The data were processed and analysed using a combination of descriptive statistical methodologies (Creswell, 2005) and inductive thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Creswell, 2013, Thomas, 2006). In the second data set, teacher participants were invited to participate in a semi-structured 40 to 50-minute interview, using a prepared protocol as an interview guide. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. All data from both sets were de-identified, with data from

transcripts processed using thematic analysis techniques as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006) and case study methodologies used by Creswell (2013) and Yin (2009).

Summary tables of participant transcripts were then created. These included codes elicited from data, signature statements and specific reference quotes. A member checking process was implemented to clarify understanding and to follow up on new perspectives arising in interviews. Each participant was sent a copy of the data obtained from the interview/s including emerging categories and themes, samples of signature quotes, and an interview summary. Participants were given the opportunity to respond to the data and summaries and discuss, confirm, clarify or withdraw data before it was included within the case study (Carlson, 2010).

Processes used in the study followed a spiral reiterative cycle, whereby quantitative data were reviewed for trends, while qualitative data from both sets were analysed and coded into categories. Qualitative data were interpreted using a general inductive approach (Hood, 2007). Categories and phrases were clustered and collapsed into major themes. The process was repeated over several cycles (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). This approach was taken for a variety of reasons. Inductive thematic analysis methods, used in many qualitative studies, are a practical and effective tool to assist with both interpreting data and generating theory from rich and dense case study data (Hood, 2007). Attention was given to key categories and emerging themes and to clarifying the textual and structural experiences of participants. These findings were then compared to the trends emerging in the quantitative data sources. The primary focus of the data analysis sought to explore teachers' perceptions on identifying underachieving students and practices they employed to support these students in their classrooms.

Pseudonyms have been used to identify all participating school and college sites and individual participants mentioned or cited in the study.

## Findings

Data analysis revealed that a few broad themes emerged. Themes emerging around identification included:

a.  Literacy and numeracy deficits or barriers;
b.  Irregular attendance;
c.  Background factors impacting on wellbeing;
d.  Limited participation and engagement in curriculum and learning.

Themes emerging around teacher practice were:

e.  Valuing the learner;
f.  Collaborating;
g.  Adjustments and modifications to curriculum and pedagogy.

**Identification of academic underachievers**

Teachers consistently identified literacy and numeracy difficulties as an indicator of an underachieving student (Hayes et al., 2006; Luke et al., 2003), making comments such as:

> They are struggling with literacy or numeracy (Teacher A, Constantius College).

Teachers also noted that the literacy and numeracy difficulties were often of a marginal nature:

> The students don't appear to have a lot of ability in many cases, but often there are some issues with their literacy and numeracy, although not to the extreme (Teacher B, Constantius College).

Students had concerning absences or trends of irregular school attendance. Teachers commented on the gaps in learning created by these absences noting:

> There is a big gap. There has just been too much stuff that has been missed or they have missed too many days off school and then they are still underachieving (Teacher C, Constantius College).

Young adolescent academic underachievers often possessed the added complication of background factors impacting on their wellbeing (Von Battenburg-Eddes & Jolles, 2013), These background challenges placed students within marginalised or 'at risk' groups due to poverty (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008), or other complex life circumstances (Luke et al., 2003; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). As one teacher said:

> A real eye opener for me this year is an awareness of the significant factors that can play on children, external to the school (Teacher D, Fidelis College).

Teachers observed that the academic underachievers they identified displayed low levels of participation and engagement in classroom activities. When exploring these themes, teachers described further influences at play in the general disconnect from learning displayed by academic underachievers (Skilling, 2014). This included low learner confidence (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Bernard, 2006; Fried & Chapman, 2012), the need for engaging and meaningful curriculum (Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2016) and supportive pedagogical relationships (Attard, 2011; Shanks & Dowden, 2013). Young adolescent academic underachievers did not appear to be connected to classroom learning programs. They struggled to meet age and stage learning outcomes, showed low levels of participation in activities and demonstrated minimal work output for assessment. One teacher commented that:

> It is the changing around in the pedagogy that they are used to in primary school, where there is much more of a student focus on learning where everyone is responsible (Teacher E, Fidelis College).

Teachers often experienced frustration around the lack of participation, engagement and connection demonstrated by underachieving students, making comments such as:

> They don't give you enough! It isn't even appropriate for me to make this sort of judgement, because they aren't showing you anything! They are not engaging and they are not taking you up on anything you might negotiate (Teacher B, Constantius College).

The underachieving students were not motivated or confident learners. Teachers commented that they found it difficult to develop positive relationships that might assist students connect to learning or engage more readily in activities. As Teacher E noted:

> I felt hurt by the two main culprits that wound everybody else up. They weren't listening to me. They weren't listening to their peers. They are very steadfast... negative students in general and looking at placing the blame (Teacher E, Fidelis College).

Teachers generally attributed this difficulty to behavioural concerns and low levels of trust and learner confidence in the identified students:

> Students need to build trust and to feel safe to make mistakes. Changing pedagogical style and curriculum modifications are needed but will not help if the student refuses to engage in what you have modified (Teacher F, State Secondary School 1).

## Practices used to support academic underachievers

Teachers used different practices to support academic underachievers within the classroom. Practices used to address underachievement in the classroom included: valuing the learner by focusing on strengthening relationships to enhance the connection to learning; collaboration with teacher aides or colleagues and improving communications with parents; and, modifications to curriculum and pedagogy. As this teacher pointed out:

> The most important thing is that their teachers know them and value them. There is a saying that I like and that is 'you can't teach them till you reach them' (Teacher G, Constantius College).

Teachers reported more reliance on extrinsic controls and motivators to support students rather than supporting the development of self-regulatory learning strategies in academic underachievers (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Fried & Chapman, 2012). One teacher reflected on these challenging aspects of her practice, commenting that:

> There is this tension between teaching procedurally, teaching the formula, and trying to get a more investigative approach. I am still grappling with that (Teacher B, Constantius College).

As Teacher H commented:

> We need to make our learning engaging and hands on and relevant to the real world so that they see there is some connection to what it is they are doing (Teacher H, Caritas College).

Teachers advocated collaboration as another strategy to support underachievers. The collaboration most teachers described, however, was relatively limited. For example,

teachers strongly advocated collaboration with teacher aides. Teacher descriptions of this collaboration commonly involved directing the teacher aide to spend more one on one time with the underachieving student, allowing the teacher more time to manage other aspects of learning in the classroom. Teachers confirmed that they found communication with parents to be relatively effective depending on the level of parent support for and valuing of their child's education. Three teachers discussed the use of collaborative planning time with colleagues. They indicated that this practice might encourage greater participation among academic underachievers through the provision of improved programs and resources.

The pedagogical practices used to support underachieving students were based on providing remedial adjustments such as scaffolds to assist with task completion, modifying and simplifying tasks, and adapting tasks to include areas of interest. These practices did not necessarily belong to a specific teaching approach, nor did findings indicate that teachers held strong beliefs about the learning approach underpinning practices used. As one teacher noted, the practices were reductive and introduced to encourage reluctant students to attempt a task or activity:

> I concentrated on negotiating 'baby steps' with him by breaking tasks down. Not dazzling him with the end-product expectations and due dates but focussing on the order of first things first (Teacher I, Constantius College).

All teachers believed that limited improvements could be made for underachieving students, without the provision of extra time and resources, commenting that:

> Time is the thing. There is so little and it is so precious. More and more we are not given the time to be professionals and to do the job we are supposed to be doing or should be doing (Teacher J, State Secondary School 2).

Many teachers in the interviews expressed frustration and concern over these two influencers of their classroom practice, and were critical of the systems and structures they worked within:

> In an ideal world, underachievers would be catered for effectively! In other words it wouldn't be such a guessing game regarding diagnosis and effective learning strategies (Teacher I, Constantius College).

## Discussion

The literature indicated that young adolescents in Year 7 and 8 seek to develop autonomy and confidence as learners (Bahr, 2010; Shanks & Dowden, 2013), developing independent learning strategies (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012), while managing the transition from primary to secondary school. Young adolescent academic underachievers identified by teachers in the study however, demonstrated literacy and/or numeracy deficits, low participation and engagement with learning, patterns of absences, and usually limited or negative relationships with their teachers. They exhibited few self-regulatory or learning behaviours and low learner confidence (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Guo, 2018).

These young adolescent academic underachievers were failing to meet age and stage standards. Furthermore, whilst clearly struggling in the classroom setting, these students were not usually recipients of extra support through targeted programs.

Teachers relied on the standard as an external criterion to drive classroom learning, and indicated that their learning programs, curriculum and pedagogies were influenced by time constraints over which they had no control. Teachers recommended adapting and modifying curriculum for academic underachievers. They indicated however that it was difficult to provide appropriate levels of challenge, autonomy and interest in learning activities to meet the needs of their diverse classes without accessing extra support from funding and resources which would provide time for teacher collaboration and curriculum development (DiCicco, Cook & Faulkner, 2016; Hayes et al., 2006). Teachers in the study engaged in some critical analysis of the curriculum taught, calling for more flexibility around delivery and modifications. Nevertheless, most teachers believed that time constraints with resources and curriculum delivery and the pressures of ensuring their students met age and stage level standards were major factors preventing them from providing adequate support for underachieving students in their classrooms.

Teachers also understood the need for supportive relationships between student and teacher to improve outcomes (Blumenfeld, 1992; Hattie, 2012; Kiefer, Alley & Ellerbrock, 2015; Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel et al., 2017). They advocated the development of improved pedagogies to assist learning. There was a recognition that standardised curriculum and achievement goals such as 'meeting the standard' did not necessarily encourage or motivate young adolescent academic underachievers. Standardised goals based on meeting Australian Curriculum benchmarks emphasised external and extrinsic performance-based goals as measures of student achievement. This could impact negatively on the underachieving students' developing identities as successful learners, their levels of confidence and the development of intrinsic motivation and learner independence (Guo, 2018).

Several teachers demonstrated awareness of the benefits of using pedagogical strategies to allow academic underachievers to connect with learning through topics of personal interest. These strategies included learner-centred and project-based learning which would strengthen student engagement and classroom participation (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Guo, 2018). Like many of the middle years teachers described in DiCicco, Cook and Faulkner's (2016) study, most teachers did not appear to subscribe to or comment about the use of middle years models or any other specific learning theories to underpin their practice. However, teachers were aware that the curriculum they taught was not engaging for young adolescent academic underachievers, even when adjustments and modifications were included to assist students.

Furthermore, examples of pedagogical practices or curriculum modifications provided by teachers were exploratory and unstructured. The modifications and adjustments they described might promote personal interest on a surface level but did not necessarily encourage students with the opportunity to engage critically, rigorously or in depth with the learning outcomes provided (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Hayes et al., 2006).

When supporting academic underachievers, teachers used eclectic and pragmatic practices formed from their professional experience and knowledge. These were presented as supportive practices designed to help the student connect to the curriculum and achieve passing grades against the age and stage standard. Nevertheless, the application of these strategies were not extensive. Practices did not appear to be consistently embedded within a focused team approach such as a middle years model, or a learner-centred program, a finding supported by the studies by Shanks and Dowden (2013) and DiCicco, Cook and Faulkner (2016). Nor did teachers indicate that practices were informed by other learning models. Some teachers advocated modifying curriculum to appeal to student interests as a helpful strategy to engage a student underachiever, having identified a lack of engagement or connection with learning as a key concern. However, few teachers indicated they supported or utilised individualised learner-centred curriculum to address the concerns outlined. The modifications and adjustments to program or practice were implemented in alignment with a discipline-focused teaching approach. Teachers in the study were concerned with ensuring their students met externally mandated year and stage standards, and these outcomes were prioritised over the development of intrinsic learning skills, aptitudes and motivation in the students.

## Conclusions and implications

The study focused on exploring teacher identification and support of academic underachievers in the early years of secondary school, seeking to provide further insights on teacher professional understanding and practice. There has been limited research investigating how Australian teachers identify young adolescent academic underachievers, characteristics and factors they consider as significant, and practices used to support these students. The study therefore highlighted academic underachievement as a current and complex issue of concern for both teachers and young adolescents at the micro level.

Findings indicated that teachers participating in the study did not generally utilise cohesive learning theories, learner-centred curriculum or middle years models of practice when supporting young adolescent academic underachievers. Many of the teachers appeared to possess limited understanding of such models or their usefulness. While teachers used some practices that fit within middle years educational models, these were usually isolated pragmatic strategies and individual adjustments. The strategies were often remedial in nature. They were implemented by teachers as minor adjustments to help student academic underachievers meet Australian Curriculum standards delivered at age and stage level for year 7 and 8.

Findings from the study highlighted that teachers utilised several supportive practices including: valuing students and attempting to develop supportive relationships; collaborating with parents, teacher aides and colleagues; and adjusting and modifying the teaching program and pedagogy to assist students to connect to the learning and achieve against year level standards. The pedagogical practices teachers used to support students were remedial adjustments that simplified the curriculum and the pedagogies employed. These practices potentially could encourage self-limiting beliefs and low learner

confidence in the young adolescents identified as underachievers. Findings from the study also indicated the need for further consideration and resources to be given to assist teachers in developing curriculum through the provision of collaborative planning time; and specific learning regarding appropriate practices to address student engagement and learner confidence. This would include firmer policies introduced at system and school level to reposition the use of learner-centred curriculum and middle years practices designed to engage students and enhance learner confidence as an integral component in the education of academic underachievers in year 7 and 8. It can be argued that while this issue continues to form a secondary concern and/or minor agenda in Australian schooling, not much will change for many young adolescent underachievers attending Australian schools.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix A: Teacher questionnaire

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UTAS

NORTHERN TASMANIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER SURVEY

Teaching the Underachieving Student in Year 7 and 8: Identifying and supporting underachieving students in the middle years.

- ❖ This survey is designed to collect base-line data on how teachers in Northern Tasmania identify and support underachieving students in Year 7 and 8.

- ❖ An information sheet that outlines privacy, ethics approvals and consent information has been included with this survey as well as a letter of invitation, outlining the parameters of the study.

- ❖ Completing this survey is voluntary and the information you provide will be anonymous.

- ❖ Completion of this survey should take no more than 15 minutes of your time. There are 16 questions in total. 9 of the questions are multiple choice or single word answers. The other questions require a short answer response .

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P. Ludicke
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Prospect, Tasmania 7025

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### Teaching Context and Experience:

Q1. How many years of experience do you have as a teacher?

_____

Q2. Do you teach students in Year 7 and/or 8?

(Please choose the most accurate response below.)

- o   I teach Year 7 and 8 students regularly
- o   I teach Year 7 and 8 students occasionally.
- o   I have taught Year 7 and 8 in the past but am not currently teaching students in these year levels.
- o   I do not teach these year levels.

Q3. Please indicate which groups best describe your teaching area/s.

- o   Languages and Humanities
- o   Mathematics and Sciences
- o   The Arts
- o   Technologies
- o   Health and Physical Education
- o   Digital and Information Technologies
- o   Learning support
- o   Other

Q4. Does your teaching role require you to work with Year 7 and 8 in other ways? Yes/No

If you answered yes, please indicate which of the choices provided describe the other ways in which you work with these students.

- o   Pastoral care roles and duties (eg. Home-group teacher, House or Year level head, AST role, Pastoral advisor or Deputy Principal).
- o   Curriculum and learning roles (eg. Team leader, Department Head, Curriculum Leader, Deputy Principal).
- o   Co-curricular roles and duties (sports, cultural, other).
- o   Learning support roles and duties.

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## Teachers, experiences and beliefs:

Q5.  If you teach (or have taught in the past) Year 7 and 8 students, how would you describe your experiences?

- o  Challenging
- o  Challenging but also rewarding
- o  Largely rewarding: I enjoy teaching these year levels.
- o  I teach students in these year levels but do not find teaching year 7 and 8 to be particularly challenging or rewarding.
- o  Other (please describe below).

_____

_____

_____

Q6.  Do you subscribe to a particular teaching philosophy or set of beliefs about teaching and learning? Please select an answer that best fits your personal beliefs and experiences as a teacher.

- o  I believe in and usually follow middle years philosophies and practices for the education of young adolescents.
- o  My teaching is based around subject-based knowledge and pedagogy and the Australian Curriculum guidelines.
- o  I follow a 'student centered' approach in my teaching. I adapt curriculum and my pedagogy to meet the needs of the students.
- o  I believe the principles of effective teaching are similar for the majority of students. I use these approaches as my guiding philosophy.

Q7. Considering your answer above, can you briefly describe some of the approaches you might use in the classroom when teaching young adolescents?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Q8. Would you consider all, or any of the approaches mentioned above as applying specifically to students in Year 7 and 8?

_____

_____

_____

Q.9  Select from the choices given, those that best represent your experiences when working with underachieving students. You can select more than one response. I believe that the students did not meet expected learning outcomes because:

- o  Students did not attempt to engage with the learning activities or curriculum.
- o  Students had difficulty understanding the learning activities or curriculum due to literacy or numeracy barriers.
- o  Students found it hard to engage with the activities and curriculum due to an identified barrier or learning difficulty or disability.
- o  Students did not attempt to participate or engage with the learning or curriculum for other reasons (eg. wellbeing issues or health reasons).
- o  Students did not engage or participate in learning activities or curriculum for behavioural reasons.

### Factors and characteristics of underachieving students:

Q10.  How would you define the term 'underachievement'?

_____

_____

_____

Q11.  Please tick the factors that you consider are significant when you observe a student who might be considered an underachieving student'?

- o  The student rarely completes tasks in the classroom.
- o  The student does not complete tasks for summative assessment or homework assignments.
- o  The student does not engage in learning activities at age or year level but will attempt work set at a lower year level.

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- o  The student struggles with organisation and management of learning.
- o  The student presents with literacy or numeracy barriers.
- o  The student is often disengaged in the classroom.
- o  The student presents with behavioural challenges in the classroom.

Q12.  If you have indicated multiple factors, which ones do you find most significant and why?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q13.  Are there any other factors, not mentioned above, that you consider important when identifying underachieving students?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

**Practices and strategies:**

Q14.  When working with students who might be considered as 'underachievers' with whom might you collaborate?

- o  Teacher aides
- o  Other colleague teachers
- o  Guidance counsellors
- o  Learning support professionals
- o  Parents and guardians of the student
- o  Year level or faculty leaders
- o  School leadership team members

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Q15. What teaching strategies do you find most helpful when working with underachieving students?

- o Curriculum adjustments and modifications
- o Change of pedagogical style and modifications
- o Use of teacher aide or volunteer to work one on one with student
- o Use of peer coaching or peer learning team
- o Tutoring student outside of scheduled lesson time
- o 'One on one' tutoring of the student within the classroom lesson
- o Further development of 'teacher-student' relationship
- o Use of sanctions (detentions) for non-compliance
- o Parent-teacher conferences/communications
- o Use of technology within classroom and lesson

Q16. Please state briefly why you found these strategies helpful:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

UTAS Thank you for taking this survey. Your participation and experience is valuable to us, and has been greatly appreciated.

## Appendix B: Semi structured interview protocol

The purpose of this interview is to talk to you about your experiences as a teacher who works, or has worked, with underachieving students in Year Seven and Eight. As you know, we are conducting a study on this, considering the following questions:

1. What characteristics and factors do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting?
2. What practices do teachers use to address academic underachievement in the classroom?

The focus of the study is on teacher experiences and beliefs-what it is that teachers know, understand and do when teaching students in these year levels. This can also include what it is that teachers can do, given the parameters and structures they work within.

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself as a teacher- describing the subjects you teach, and the students you are currently teaching?
2. How would you describe your approach to teaching and learning?
3. What are your understandings and beliefs around middle schooling?
4. Have you worked (or are currently working with) any students in Year 7 and 8 that you (or someone else) have identified as an underachiever?
5. Can you describe to me the student/s and how they are currently underachieving?
6. Do you think that the student/s underachievement has been going on for a while-or is it a recent trend?
7. What characteristics or factors do you consider significant when identifying this student/s as an underachiever?
8. What sorts of things do you do to support this student?
9. Are there other people who you collaborate with when working with this student/s? (This might include teachers, teacher aides, support staff, pastoral care or curriculum leaders, parents or family members)?
10. What sorts of things do you do when working with students x, y or z to support them?
11. How helpful or effective do you think these supports are?
12. What sorts of things do you consider when you have noted an improvement or measure of success with the student/s?
13. Would there be any difficulties or obstacles that you believe might prevent you from working with the student to assist their achievement?
14. Can you talk about some of your over-riding concerns (worries) regarding the student/s?
15. What would you like to see happen for this student (in an ideal world)?
16. Are there any other matters that you would like to discuss that you believe we have not addressed yet?

*Thank you very much for your time, understanding and generosity when participating in this interview. Your contribution has been very helpful.*

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