

**“SHE DOESN’T CHOOSE TO DO WELL”: AN EXAMINATION OF  
THE DISCURSIVE CONSTITUTION OF ACADEMIC  
UNDERACHIEVEMENT.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis troubles current taken-for-granted hegemonic understandings of academic ‘underachievement’ by considering the complex processes that constitute primary school students’ academic subjectivities. It employs post-structuralist concepts of discourse, subjectivity, agency and positioning theory to examine the conditions under which discursive power acts to make the ‘underachieving’ student possible. In addition, this thesis examines how the research participants account for and negotiate their positioning as underachieving students. The concept of intersectionality is deployed to examine the complex ways in which the categories gender, ethnicity and social class play out in the discursive constitution of the underachieving student within the New Zealand context.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students, aged 11 to 12 years, their parents/caregivers and their classroom teacher. Discourse analysis of the interview data examined students’ experiences of academic underachievement and the ways in which these are shaped by various social forces. The analysis was aimed at troubling current conceptualisations of academic underachievement as the ‘way things are’.

This thesis presents three data chapters. Each of the data chapters examines a different aspect of how students become discursively constituted as underachieving and its effects. Three themes emerged from the analysis. The first theme is that the normalising gaze of institutional discursive practices are implicated in the disciplinary techniques of testing, ranking, and streaming. The effects of these practices manifested in the students’ narratives. The second theme to emerge from the analysis is the complex and situational ways in which social categories play out in the discursive constitution of the underachieving student.

Neoliberal discourses of ‘responsibilisation’ and ‘choice’ are mobilised by the adults in positions of power (i.e., classroom teacher and parents) in relation to the social categories of ethnicity, gender and social class, to position underachieving students outside of



hegemonic discourses of what it means to be a ‘good’ student. The third theme relates to the complex and contradictory ways in which power relations work in relation to social categories and the discursively constituted subject. The power relations between middle class parents and the schooling system works to ensure that their children experience academic success goes unrecognised as well as the ‘emotional work’ undertaken by the families of students who have been discursively constituted as underachieving.

This thesis therefore destabilises the taken-for-grantedness of hegemonic explanations for underachievement by asking students to account for their experience of being positioned as underachieving. Moreover, it troubles the taken-for-grantedness of the normalising gaze and its effects as well as the contradictory ways in which power relations work in relation to social categories and the discursively constituted subject. The study offers scope for policy makers and practitioners within the New Zealand context to consider the effects on students and their families who have been discursively constituted as underachieving.

## **PUBLICATION AND PRESENTATION**

Chapter 4 of this thesis was presented at *Psy-Interrupted: Critical Perspectives on the Psy-Disciplines in Education Symposium*, University of Newcastle, June 2014 and was published as a book chapter in 2016:

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### **STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY**

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

(Matthew Wilson-Wheeler)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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