Underachieving of High-Potential Learners
By: Colt Harper

Early researchers (Raph, Goldberg, and Passow, 1966) and some recent authors (Davis and Rimm, 1989) have defined underachievement in terms of a discrepancy between a child’s school performance and some ability index such as an IQ score. The most basic definition of gifted underachievement in the literature points to a discrepancy between actual achievement and intelligence (or potential or ability, depending on the author; Baum et al., 1995; Peters et al., 2000; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Richert, 1991; Rimm, 1997; Whitmore, 1980). There is not one definition that explains underachievement among gifted students. Each school district has a gifted definition in place that rely mostly on teacher recommendations and intelligence or achievement test score (Coleman, Gallagher, & Foster, 1994). In a broad sense, underachievement might be viewed as having low grades and performance on achievement tests, lack of life goals, avoidance of creative projects, and low levels of effort on extracurricular tasks. Overall underachievement is a behavior that can change overtime.

Did you know?
According to Morisano and Shore, between 15% and 50% of gifted children achieve significantly below their intellectual and creative potential in their personal, work-related, and academic lives (2010).

Characteristics of Underachievement
- Underachievement is seen as a problem of attitude or work habits.
- Underachievement is content and situation specific.
- Underachievement is in the eyes of the beholder. For some students (and teachers and parents), as long as a passing grade is attained, there is no underachievement.
- Underachievement is tied intimately to self-concept development. Children who learn to see themselves in terms of failure eventually begin to place self-imposed limits of what is possible.

By: James R. Delisle and Sandra L., 1990

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Factors that Affect Underachievers

Researchers have found that there are numerous factors that can contribute to gifted students becoming underachievers. One study found that underachievement can include social and economic influences, race, culture, twice exceptionality, lack of motivation due to socioemotional problems, lack of interest, and absence of educational challenge, engagement, and support. However, some researchers suspect that underachievement results from a combination of factors related to the child (e.g., self-esteem, willingness to take risks, need for achievement), the child’s parents (e.g., educational level, economic status, expectations, values), and the child’s school (e.g., educational policies, ability level of peers, teaching methods).

Identifying Underachievers

By: Reis, S. & McCoach, D., 2000

We propose an imperfect, yet workable operational definition for defining and identifying underachievers in general, as well as gifted underachievers. Underachievers are students who exhibit a severe discrepancy between expected achievement (as measured by standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments) and actual achievement (as measured by class grades and teacher evaluations). To be classified as an underachiever, the discrepancy between expected and actual achievement must not be the direct result of a diagnosed learning disability and must persist over an extended period of time. Gifted underachievers are underachievers who exhibit superior scores on measures of expected achievement (i.e., standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments). Ideally, the researcher would standardize both the predictor and the criterion variables and would identify as underachievers those students whose actual achievement is at least one standard deviation below their expected achievement level. In reality, the standardization of classroom grades may be neither feasible nor meaningful.

Research

According to Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert, nothing may be as frustrating to educators and parents as a bright, young mind that seems to be wasted. In fact, concern with the problem of underachievement, especially among potentially high-achieving students, has increased substantially in recent years. Professionals have agreed for decades that the phenomenon of underachievement is complex, baffling, and challenging. Although considerable research has been conducted on underachievement among students with high academic potential, we still know little about it. Gallagher (1985) argues that the research on underachievement generally lacks substantive studies. Further, many of the findings that have been reported are contradictory and leave practitioners confused and ill-equipped to deal effectively with the problem. Professionals cannot agree on specific characteristics of students who are underachieving or the factors contributing to the problem. Evidence of effective intervention strategies is especially inconsistent and inconclusive (1995).
What are the most promising solutions to underachievement?

By: J. Smutney, 2004

Examine the Problem Individually.
Underachievement covers a broad spectrum of situations from a minor school problem with a fairly obvious cause to a more entrenched long-term pattern. Since underachievement is such a varied and complex phenomenon, each case must be examined individually — with no preconceptions. In the article, Hansford observes: “Underachievement is very specific to the individual child; intervention and remediation of underachievement must be individually developed and implemented” (2001, p. 316).

Create a Teacher-Parent Collaboration.

Teachers and parents need to work together and pool their information and experience regarding the child. Most interventions in the literature involve parent-teacher collaborations, where they can coordinate their efforts and help the child progress more.

Interventions

By: James R. Delisle and Sandra L. Berger (1990)

There are ways to reverse the behavior of underachievement. According to Whitmore, three types of strategies that she found effective in working with underachieving behaviors in students (1990):

1. Supportive Strategies. Classroom techniques and designs that allow students to feel they are part of a "family," versus a "factory."

2. Intrinsic Strategies. These strategies incorporate the idea that students’ self-concepts as learners are tied closely to their desire to achieve academically.

3. Remedial Strategies. Teachers who are effective in reversing underachieving behaviors recognize that students are not perfect - that each child has specific strengths and weaknesses as well as social, emotional and intellectual needs.

Most interventions designed to reverse underachievement are grouped into two general categories: counseling and instructional interventions. The best-known interventions involve part-time or full-time special classrooms for the underachieving students. These interventions usually involve smaller student to teacher ratios, allowing students more choice, and less conventional teaching and learning activities. The research showed that using students’ strengths and interests can reverse the underachieving cycle. No one type of intervention appears to be effective for the full range of underachieving gifted students.

Questions Teachers and Parents can Explore Together

In what areas has the child shown exceptional ability?

What are the child’s preferred learning styles?

What insights do parents and teachers have about the child’s strengths and problem areas?

What does the child say about self-needs, interests, and school experiences, and how is this information to be interpreted?

“Create an individual plan for the child and stay focused on the child’s gifts.” - J. Smutney, 2004
Become more aware of the characteristics, needs and issues of gifted children.

Educators, reexamine your own attitudes and beliefs about gifted children and adolescents, especially those who are highly creative and may be comfortable in their nonconformity.

They need help in “being different.” The lack of empathy and rejection by others, including adults and peers, is commonplace for many of these children. Too many gifted children and adolescents suffer in silence, or seek negative ways to express their frustration and anger. Teasing and humiliation must be stopped. Empathy and intimacy are needed so that emotional sensitivity doesn’t become emotional disturbance.

All of us must advocate for appropriate services to address the lack of challenge and the issues so many gifted children and adolescents face.

Programming and services need to be implemented for specific extraordinary talents. In New York State, gifted children are the only special needs students who do not warrant appropriate educational services! The laws need to be changed now.

Parents, develop an awareness of your gifted child’s characteristics.

Let them know that they are more than their achievement or academic ability. If you sense sadness, rejection, or anger, speak with your child. Find a counselor who has training and experience in working with gifted children and adolescents to help you.

Books

- Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades And What You Can Do About It: A Six-Step Program for Parents and Teachers by Sylvia Rimm


References


