

9 UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN GIFTED STUDENTS

by **Sally M. Reis, Ph.D.** and
D. Betsy McCoach, M.A.

The underachievement of gifted students is a perplexing phenomenon. Too often, for no apparent reason, students who show great academic promise fail to perform at a level commensurate with their abilities, frustrating both parents and teachers (Whitmore, 1986). Many gifted students continue to do well on achievement or reasoning tests, but, in their failure to turn in assignments or to attend or participate in class, demonstrate their disengagement from the educational process. Issues concerned with defining underachievement, identifying underachieving gifted students, and explaining the reasons for this underachievement continue to stir controversy among practitioners, researchers, and clinicians. Legitimate problems exist in determining whether or not these students are at greater risk for social or emotional problems than other students, and, to date, most interventions to reverse underachievement have met with limited success.

Defining Underachievement in Gifted Students

Any discussion of issues relating to underachievement in gifted students must carefully define both the constructs of giftedness and underachievement. The most common component of the various definitions of underachievement in gifted students involves identifying a discrepancy between ability and achievement (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995a, 1995b; Butler-Por, 1987; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Emerick, 1992; Rimm, 1997a, 1997b; Supplee, 1990; Whitmore, 1980; Wolfe, 1991).

Identifying Underachievers

Criteria for identifying gifted underachievers should include a method for determining observable discrepancies between ability and achievement over a substantial period of time (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). Although students may experience short-term lags that may not indicate a long-term problem, whenever a student's performance drops substantially over a short time period, it merits the attention of a teacher or a counselor.

Some professionals may try to gauge an age/performance discrepancy when identifying underachievers (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). In other words, they may not identify a student as an underachiever unless performance in at least one major subject area is at least one year below grade level. Although this may be a suitable method for the general school population, such an age/performance discrepancy may only identify the most severely underachieving gifted students. Rimm, Cornale, Manos, and Behrend (1989) suggested using longitudinal test data to screen for possible underachievement. IQ test scores, achievement percentile scores, or grades that have declined for three years in a row are strong indicators of an underachievement problem. However, using such a formula may not only underestimate the number of students who are falling into patterns of underachievement (Rimm et al.), but do so too late for effective intervention.

Causes of Underachievement

Underachievement constitutes a symptom that may be indicative of any—often a combination—of a number of causes. Some of these originate in the environment, some in the child, some in a mismatch of the two (Baker, Bridger, & Evans, 1998; Reis & McCoach, 2000). The following are examples of an almost infinite number of possibilities:

Environmental causes

- chronically underchallenging, slow-moving classroom experiences (Whitmore, 1986), or moving from a regular classroom to an appropriately challenging one (Krissman, 1989);
- peer pressure to conform to "regular" norms, to "be like everyone else," which may be particularly intense for students from underrepresented minorities (Diaz, 1998; Ford, 1992, 1996);
- loneliness, isolation from classmates and the educational enterprise (Mandel & Marcus, 1988, 1995); and
- family dynamics (family conflict drains energies; parents' centering on the underachieving child masks other conflicts; (Green, Fine, & Tollefson, 1988); family has too-low, too-variable, or too-rigid expectations (Rimm, 1995; Rimm & Lowe, 1988).

Factors within the individual (may be generalized traits or responses to the above)

- internalizing issues: depression, anxiety, perfectionism, failure-avoidance, low self-esteem (Bruns, 1992; Mandel & Marcus, 1988; Supplee, 1990);
- externalizing issues: rebelliousness, irritability, nonconformity, anger (Bricklin & Bricklin, 1967; Bruns, 1992; Rimm, 1995);
- unrecognized learning deficits that interfere with learning/performance (Vail, 1987);

- nontraditional gifts (e.g., spatial reasoning) that do not fit teachers' expectations (Gohm, Humphreys, & Yao, 1998);
- deficits in self-regulation: disorganization, impulsivity, attention deficit (Baum, Olenchak, & Owen, 1998; Borkowski & Thorpe, 1994; Krouse & Krouse, 1981; Schunk, 1998);
- maladaptive strategies, such as failure to set realistic goals (Van Boxtel & Mönks, 1992), short-term rather than long-term coping strategies (Gallagher, 1991); and
- social immaturity (Whitmore, 1980) or overemphasis on social, as opposed to academic, pursuits (Mandel & Marcus, 1988; Van Boxtel & Mönks, 1992).

Interventions

Although conducting case studies and qualitative research on underachieving gifted students has become quite popular, very few researchers have attempted to utilize true quasi-experimental designs to study the efficacy of various interventions. Most of the interventions reported in the literature (Supplee, 1990; Whitmore, 1980) were designed to effect immediate results with a group of acutely underachieving gifted students. The documented effectiveness of most interventions designed to reverse underachievement in gifted students has been inconsistent and inconclusive (Emerick, 1988), with limited long-term success (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Emerick, 1992). Interventions aimed at reversing gifted underachievement fall into two general categories: counseling and instructional interventions (Butler-Por, 1993; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982).

Counseling interventions concentrate on changing the personal, family, or ambition of both dynamics that contribute to a student's underachievement. Counseling interventions may include individual, group, or family, or some combination of all three (Jeon, 1990). Many early attempts to improve underachievers' academic achievement through counseling treatments were unsuccessful (Baymur & Patterson, 1965; Broedel, Ohlsen, Proff, & Southard, 1965). In most counseling situations, the counselor's goal is not to force the underachiever to become a more successful student, but

rather to help the student decide whether success is a desirable goal and, if so, to help reverse counterproductive habits and cognitions.

Certain treatments aimed at combating underachievement combine counseling and school-centered interventions. For example, Rimm's (1995; Rimm et al., 1989) trifocal model is an approach that involves parents and school personnel in an effort to reverse student underachievement. This plan involves assessing students' underachievement; changing student, parent, and teacher expectations for these underachievers; and providing differentiated modifications for these students both at home and at school.

The best-known school-based educational interventions for gifted students have established either part-time or full-time special classrooms for gifted underachievers (e.g., Butler-Por, 1987; Fehrenbach, 1993; Supplee, 1990; Whitmore, 1980). Usually, a smaller student-to-teacher ratio exists, teachers create less conventional types of teaching and learning activities, teachers give students some choice and freedom in exercising control, and students are encouraged to utilize different learning strategies. Whitmore, for example, designed and implemented a full-time elementary program for gifted underachievers. Supplee instituted a part-time program for gifted elementary underachievers. Both programs stressed the importance of addressing affective education, as well as the necessity of creating student-centered classroom environments.

The literature is lacking a group of studies that utilize a control or comparison group or a truly longitudinal design, and investigators have yet to track on a long-term basis the progress of students once they leave a program. Although some underachieving students appear to progress during academic interventions, the long-term effects of such programs are less clear. What happens when the student re-enters the regular class and is once again faced with nonstimulating schoolwork? How can the underachievement of older students be reversed? These and many other questions remain unanswered.

Emerick (1992) investigated the reasons that some students are able to reverse their academic underachievement without the assistance of formal interventions. Her qualitative research study examined the patterns of underachievement and subsequent achievement of 10 young adults. Several common factors appeared to play a part in the students' reversal of underachievement. Participants in

Emerick's study perceived that out-of-school interests and activities, parents, development of goals associated with grades, teachers, and changes in "selves" had a positive impact on achievement. In addition, participants were most likely to develop achievement-oriented behaviors when they were stimulated in class and given the opportunity to pursue topics of interest to them.

This study indicates that one type of effective intervention may be based on students' strengths and interests (Renzulli, 1977; Renzulli & Reis, 1985, 1997). In a recent study (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995a, 1995b), researchers used self-selected Type III enrichment projects as a systematic intervention for underachieving gifted students. This approach (Renzulli) specifically targets student strengths and interests in order to help reverse academic underachievement.

Because the factors influencing the development and manifestation of underachievement vary, no one type of intervention will be effective for the full range of underachieving gifted students. Rather, a continuum of strategies and services may be necessary if we are to address this problem systematically. Therefore, future researchers in this field will not only need to posit coherent, complete models of gifted underachievement and design interventions in accordance with their proposed models, but take into account individual student needs.

Areas for Future Research

We do not know how many talented students underachieve, but we know that this issue is foremost in the minds of practitioners (Renzulli, Reid, & Gubbins, 1992). Future research must attempt to unravel the complex causes of academic underachievement and provide interventions that help reverse underachievement behavior. Several lines of research remain inadequately explored.

We need to move beyond correlational studies of common characteristics of underachieving students and begin to explore linkages and flow of causality among these different characteristics and student achievement. For example, according to several authors (e.g., Belcastro, 1985; Bricklin & Bricklin, 1967; Bruns, 1992; Diaz, 1998; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Fine & Pitts, 1980; Fink,

1965; Ford, 1996; Kanoy, Johnson, & Kanoy, 1980; Schunk, 1998; Supplee, 1990; Van Boxtel & Möns, 1992; Whitmore, 1980), positive self-concept appears to correlate with student achievement, raising an interesting but unanswered question: Does low self-concept cause underachievement, or does underachievement result in a deterioration of self-concept, or does a third exogenous variable influence both self-concept and scholastic achievement? If low self-concept causes underachievement, interventions such as counseling approaches designed to raise self-concept should enhance student achievement. However, counseling treatments have met with limited success. Research on the flow of causality between student achievement and self-efficacy, self-regulation, student attitudes, peer attitudes, and other factors believed to influence underachievement will help researchers to develop more effective intervention strategies to combat underachievement in gifted students.

Another area for research involves studying whether or not gifted underachievers differ significantly from other underachievers and, if so, how McCall, Evahn, and Kratzer (1992) observed that most of the comparison-group research within this area compares gifted underachievers to their achieving mental-ability cohorts, often finding qualitative differences between the groups. However, an interesting, though less studied, line of research involves comparing gifted underachievers to other students at the same achievement level according to GPA, achievement test scores, and similar measures regardless of their measured mental ability. Do gifted underachievers have more in common with gifted students who do achieve or low-achieving students who are not gifted? Dowdall and Colangelo (1982) observed that gifted underachievers seem to share more characteristics with other underachievers than they do with gifted achievers. Whether gifted students require interventions that are qualitatively different from nongifted underachievers has yet to be determined.

Finally, researchers must translate insights about causes and correlates of underachievement into models and strategies that educators can use to develop more effective prevention and intervention programs. If unchallenging scholastic environments produce underachieving gifted students, then providing intellectual challenge and stimulation at all grade levels should decrease underachievement. Do schools that differentiate instruction, provide gifted program-

ming, or both for high-ability students have lower incidences of underachievement? Is providing intellectual challenge especially critical during a particular age range? Bright, underachieving students might benefit from curriculum differentiation techniques (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992; Renzulli & Smith, 1978), such as curriculum compacting, interesting Type III enrichment opportunities, and acceleration. The literature also presents a variety of other classroom designs, such as self-contained classrooms and home and school partnerships. Because causes and correlates of underachievement differ, no single intervention reverses underachievement patterns in the full spectrum of gifted underachievers. Further research in this area must focus on developing multiple approaches to both preventing and reversing underachievement. Such approaches would differentiate among different types of underachievement, incorporating both proactive and preventative counseling and innovative instructional interventions. In addition, researchers should incorporate the knowledge gained from social cognitive theory to combat underachievement (Dai, Moon, & Feldhusen, 1998; Schunk, 1998; Zimmerman, 1989). Interventions that enhance self-efficacy or develop self-regulation may complement other intervention strategies and increase their effectiveness. Different types of underachievers may require different proportions of counseling, self-regulation training, and instructional or curricular modifications.

Conclusion

The concept of underachievement, though often discussed, is still vaguely defined in the professional literature. The absence of any clear, precise definition of gifted underachievement restricts research-based comparisons and hinders the quest for suitable interventions. Precise operational definitions of gifted underachievement may prevent the identification of certain types of potential gifted underachievers, while more flexible, inclusive definitions of gifted underachievement may not adequately distinguish between gifted students who achieve and those who underachieve. The psychological characteristics ascribed to gifted underachievers vary and some-

times contradict each other. Further, more adequate research is needed in this area in order to unravel the mystery of why gifted students underachieve and how we can help them to succeed.

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