

Gifted Underachievement: Oxymoron or Educational Enigma?

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Gifted underachievement, at first glance, seems like an oxymoron. How can a gifted student also be an underachiever? By implicit definition gifted students are those who have developed high levels of intelligence and consistently perform at these high levels (Clark, 2002). Underachievement, on the other hand, is associated with a failure to do well in school. This seeming mismatch of terms is puzzling—giftedness and underachievement do not mesh. Like an oxymoron, they are at opposite ends of the educational spectrum. It is no wonder that the underachievement of gifted students is such a mystery.

Amazingly, estimates of students with high ability who do not achieve well are as high as 50% (Hoffman, Wasson, & Christianson, 1985; Rimm, 1987). This group represents a large population of talented students who are either underserved or neglected by gifted programs. If this many talented children are being ignored, it is imperative that the issue be addressed. However, a survey of the current literature demonstrates that educators disagree about the issue of gifted underachievement—not only in the definition, but the very legitimacy of gifted underachievement as a category of academic behavior. For example, Colangelo, Kerr, Christensen, and Maxey (2004) revealed that some researchers believe the majority of underachievement can simply be attributed to test error. Yet, psychologists, such as Sylvia Rimm, have spent their entire careers working to reverse underachievement.

A considerable number of articles, studies, and books have been written on the subject of gifted underachievement. Rather than clarifying a perplexing situation, the sheer amount of information and inconsistencies in definition muddies the waters. Without a clear definition, the concept of gifted underachievement remains elusive.

In an effort to understand and recognize gifted underachievement, this article will explore the definitions, characteristics, causes, and available interventions. Also, attention to underachievement in special populations will be briefly examined and discussed in an attempt to better understand this puzzling phenomenon.

Defining Underachievement in Gifted Students

Reis and McCoach (2000) pointed out that any discussion of the issue of gifted underachievement should begin with a definition. With all the assessments available to today's educators and the mountains of existing research, this should be a simple task. However, rather than one straightforward definition, many exist throughout the literature. Even more than two decades ago, Dowdall and Colangelo (1982) were already proposing that the concept of underachieving gifted students had become nearly meaningless due to numerous categories of definitions.

At first glance, gifted underachievers seem to have more in common with low achievers than high achievers, namely, low performance in the classroom. The interesting difference that sets the gifted underachiever apart from his or her counterpart, the low achiever, is the ability to score high on standardized achievement tests, which typically assess knowledge that is needed to perform well in the classroom. This discrepancy between ability and

achievement is the basic ingredient that a majority of educators use in defining gifted underachievement.

Dowdall and Colangelo (1982) described three underlying themes in the definition of gifted underachievement:

1. Underachievement as a discrepancy between *potential* achievement and actual achievement.
2. Underachievement as a discrepancy between *predicted* achievement and actual achievement.
3. Underachievement as a failure to develop or use potential.

The most common definitions of gifted underachievement fall within the first theme; however, Reis and McCoach (2000) were quick to point out problems: the criteria used to identify giftedness varies from state to state and district to district, standardized tests may not directly reflect the actual school experience, and classroom grades may be unreliable and subjective.

Similar problems exist when attempting to define gifted underachievement using the second theme. No test is 100% reliable, especially when attempting to predict achievement. Something as simple as a bad mood or ill health on test day can skew achievement scores, resulting in measurement errors in prediction.

The third theme, underachievement as a failure to use potential, is more utilitarian in that it can be applied to all levels of learners. Rimm's (1997) definition of gifted underachievement fits this theme: —Underachievement is a discrepancy between a child's school performance and some index of the child's ability. If children are not working to their ability in school, they are underachieving|| (p. 18). Even though Rimm was quick to point out that true underachievement problems are a matter of degree, her definition is a concise, easy-to-understand statement that explains the crux of gifted underachievement.

Once a working definition of gifted underachievement has been established, it is easier to explore its influences (or causes), as well as to describe common characteristics that set the stage for it. Like finding a definition, there is no one single event or factor that contributes to underachievement in gifted students. The causes of underachievement are complex (Fehrenbach, 1993), and a pattern that develops in elementary school often continues into the upper grades. There are a number of contributing factors to this pattern cited in the literature.

Gallagher (1991), Rimm (1997), and others have suggested that the causes of underachievement can be separated into environmental (school) factors and personal/family factors. Environmental factors appear to stem from two problem areas: the school and the student's peer group. An anti-intellectual school atmosphere that focuses on athletics and social status and an antigifted atmosphere can contribute to underachievement (Rimm, 1995). Inflexible requirements for graduation that require students to follow a specific path from entry to graduation may also contribute to low achievement in older gifted students. Underachieving students often report peer influence as the single most important force blocking their achievement (Reis & McCoach,

2000). A study that measured students' grades and behavior in the fall and spring found that students seemed to more closely resemble their friends at the end of the school year than at the beginning (Berndt, 1999), with their grades tending to decrease in the spring if their friends had lower grades in the fall. Is it any surprise that antiacademic peer groups could exert enough pressure on gifted students to cause them to hide their talents?

Underachievement related to personal matters often starts with unfavorable coping skills or learning styles. Research has attributed some difficulties encountered in these two areas to a form of neurological dysfunction or imbalance (Gallagher, 1991). However, the overwhelming factor appears to be in the area of personal/psychological underachievement due to dynamics within the family. Subsequent interactions at school add a layer of complication to an already perplexing situation. Interestingly, several characteristics of gifted underachievers were described decades ago by Lewis Terman in his famous longitudinal study of 1,500 gifted students. The underachieving group was set apart by the following characteristics (Gallagher):

- low levels of self-confidence,
- an inability to persevere,
- a lack of goals, and
- feelings of inferiority.

Contemporary researchers (Rimm, 1995; Whitmore, 1987) have confirmed Terman's findings that underachieving gifted students are different from achieving gifted students in personal and family relationships, as well as in self-image and motivation. Family is frequently identified as an unhealthy place for many gifted underachievers. Rimm and Lowe (1988) cited poor family relationships and inconsistent standards as being characteristic of the family dynamics of gifted underachievers: —commitment to career and respect for school were remarkably . . . absent|| (p. 358). However, it may be that parents of underachieving students simply do not have the skills to support their children's unusual academic talents.

Culturally Diverse Underachievers

Gifted underachievement crosses all cultural boundaries and, interestingly, differs across the cultures. Pointing out that little research has focused specifically on culturally diverse underachievers, Reis and McCoach (2000) suggested that these students face unique barriers to achievement. For example, minority students are frequently underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, and different subcultures' definitions of achievement may differ from that of the dominant culture.

Language typically adversely affects gifted Latino students' achievement. Being proficient in English generally means greater success in school for Spanish-speaking students. However, it is not the only condition necessary for success. A different value system that exists within the Hispanic American community may be of greater impact, particularly for female students (Reis, 1998).

Identification practices may adversely affect gifted African American students. Baldwin (1987) suggested that the practices normally used to determine eligibility for gifted programs may not be valid or reliable for students from culturally diverse backgrounds; in particular, using intelligence scores as the sole criterion can create a bias toward African American students. Mickelson (1990) reported an attitude-achievement paradox: a positive

attitude toward education coupled with low academic achievement that makes it difficult to reverse African American underachievement.

Gender differences also affect underachievement. According to a study done by Weiss (1972), approximately 25% of above-average females may be considered underachievers, as compared with approximately 50% of above-average males. Even though it appears that academically underachieving gifted girls are far outnumbered by underachieving gifted boys (Colangelo et al., 2004), increased attention has been aimed toward female underachievers. Deliberate underachievement seems to be prevalent among bright adolescent females as a response to perceived sex-role expectations (Fox, 1981).

The issue of cultural diversity within the gifted population is beginning to receive more attention, particularly in the area of —hidden underachievers,|| students who underachieve because the educational system is not designed to recognize their talents. Because cultures vary in what is valued, should we impose one culture's ideas of achievement upon another's? Is this imposition helping children or, perhaps, hurting them? These questions need to be addressed before the underachievement of minority gifted students can be adequately addressed.

Interventions

Much has been written about the complex causes and characteristics of gifted underachievers, and the major points have been outlined above. However, understanding the causes and identification of gifted underachievers is only the first step. While appropriate interventions are necessary if educators are to correct this problem, it is understandable that proposed interventions have taken on several different directions. As with creating a definition and looking at causes of gifted underachievement, no single intervention has been found to be the answer. In fact, according to Reis and McCoach (2000), effective interventions designed to reverse underachievement in gifted students have been —inconsistent and inconclusive|| (p. 202).

Butler-Por (1987), Dowdall and Colangelo (1982), and others have described two categories of interventions aimed at reversing gifted underachievement: counseling and instructional interventions. Counseling interventions attempt to change any personal or family dynamics affecting gifted students' underachievement. Rather than attempting to force gifted students to be more successful, counseling interventions help them decide goals and help reverse any habits that are blocking the road to success. While some researchers believe the debate is still out on whether counseling interventions are truly successful, Rimm (1995) described a Trifocal Model used by schools with some success in reversing underachievement in gifted students. The six-step Trifocal Model begins with assessment and focuses on communication, changing expectations, identification, correction of deficiencies, and modifications at home and school.

The second category of instructional interventions focuses on special classrooms designed to create a more favorable environment for gifted underachievers. These classrooms have a small teacher-student ratio and use less conventional approaches to teaching. Students typically have more freedom and control of their own learning. Unfortunately, this strategy has not encountered much success in reversing gifted underachievement. Reasons for the

lack of success range from educational politics, to difficulty in getting school districts to implement them due to limited time, physical space, and resources (Fehrenbach, 1993).

Why some programs work and others do not is almost as mysterious as the concept of gifted underachievement itself. However, Fine and Pitts (1980) devised some useful guidelines for planning and implementing successful intervention programs:

1. Initially develop a structure to support the child.
2. Issues, expectations, and intervention plans need to be solidly outlined.
3. Appoint one person to be in charge of the intervention plan.
4. Involve the family in a close, working relationship with the school.
5. Parents and teachers should establish a strong parental posture to learning.
6. Group meetings should parallel family interactions.
7. Use follow-up conferences with the same people to maintain accountability.
8. Expect and confront sabotages (pp. 53–54).

Successful intervention programs do not let the child be in charge. After all, underachieving children have shown their inability to work in their own best interest. However, through successful intervention over time, the child can be invited to be more active as problems and behavior issues are resolved.

Conclusions

As researchers (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Fine & Pitts, 1980; Gallagher, 1991) have pointed out, gifted underachievers are more than smart children bored with school. There are far-reaching personal and political implications when gifted children—or any children, for that matter—do not work to their potential. The loss to society can be tragic.

An examination of the literature identifies general characteristics of gifted underachievers and suggests some causes for this peculiar phenomenon. The unique situation of culturally diverse gifted underachievers also requires attention. No panacea exists for resolving the issue of gifted underachievement, and unfortunately, it seems more questions arise than answers.

What can we do about the situation of gifted underachievement? Focusing on what we know, or at least what we think we know, as well as what we don't know, is a good place to start. We know that there are gifted students who are not performing to their potential and that there are a variety of causes and influences. However, educators do not have reliable information about how many gifted students are underachieving.

Intervention strategies exist with differing measures of success. Effective strategies are thought to reverse the problem of underachievement; unfortunately, such strategies, which include private programs, tend to be expensive and labor intensive. Is there a more efficient way to affect change? Some researchers believe links between certain learning disabilities and gifted underachievement may suggest minor neurological problems. Is there something happening in our environment that produces this anomaly, or is it a genetic anomaly?

Out of questions answers may grow. Until that time, the process of defining underachievement, identifying underachieving gifted students, explaining underachievement, and suggesting interventions remains an educational enigma.

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