Underachievement and motivation: why children underachieve and the school counselor's role in helping students

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Abstract
Underachievement and lack of motivation are two matters of concern that are significantly affecting elementary children in North American classrooms (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). School counselors have responsibilities to encourage and foster growth in children's learning through the use of combined techniques such as self-monitoring and self-evaluation. In addition, counselors are attempting to understand and further explore channels that may stifle a child's progress including, but not limited to: the classroom environment, the child's belief system, internal needs and cognitions, the child's sense of autonomy as well as competency, and basic needs of belonging and fun.

In aiding the underachieved child, it is imperative to familiarize oneself with early developmental theories in order to understand the basis of motivation. Counselors must also equip teachers with resources and a modified view of the classroom setting, various learning styles, and learning strategies that will benefit the child in need. Counselors working with children who lack motivation and underachieve, can create a safe place where children's maladaptive beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes are challenged.
UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND MOTIVATION: WHY CHILDREN UNDERACHIEVE AND THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR’S ROLE IN HELPING STUDENTS

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Sarah M. Kakacek

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Underachievement and lack of motivation are two matters of concern that are significantly affecting elementary children in North American classrooms (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). School counselors have responsibilities to encourage and foster growth in children's learning through the use of combined techniques such as self-monitoring and self-evaluation. In addition, counselors are attempting to understand and further explore channels that may stifle a child's progress including, but not limited to: the classroom environment, the child's belief system, internal needs and cognitions, the child's sense of autonomy as well as competency, and basic needs of belonging and fun. In aiding the underachieved child, it is imperative to familiarize oneself with early developmental theories in order to understand the basis of motivation. Counselors must also equip teachers with resources and a modified view of the classroom setting, various learning styles, and learning strategies that will benefit the child in need. Counselors working with children who lack motivation and underachieve, can create a safe place where children's maladaptive beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes are challenged.
Underachievement and Motivation: Why Children Underachieve and the School Counselor’s Role in Helping Students

Underachievement and lack of motivation are ever present in our North American public elementary schools today (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). It is necessary to glance at the present educational psychological framework involving motivation in schools as well as how underachievement is affecting children today. Because of the increase in children who are struggling to achieve in elementary school, it is important to be alerted in how to prevent this occurrence from continuing throughout their education. To gain an understanding, it is beneficial to recognize views rooted in developmental theory in order to gain new perspectives on an old concern—underachievement.

Everyday throughout thousands of classrooms and households across the country, a familiar dialogue is rehearsed:

"Why aren't you turning in your homework?"

"You know you can do it! And you know that I (we) will help you if you need it!"

"What don't you understand about getting your work done? Is your work done?"

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I don't know. I'll get it done." promises the child.

For the most part, teachers and parents are utterly frustrated when their student or son or daughter is not reaching their potential. Parents and teachers tend to feel anxious about educational prospects as early as the child’s second year of school (Rathvon, 1996). From the child’s point of view, he or she is discouraged. The child knows he or she has disappointed the teacher, the parents, and most of all—his or her own self. The child is telling the truth when he does not know why he does not complete work. The child
sincerely wants to do better to please the parents and feel better about one’s self, but more than likely, he or she fails the promise to improve.

The purpose of this paper is to redefine underachievement and related issues in children’s lives, as well as educate school counselors in helping students achieve. The first part of the paper will describe children who underachieve with the warning signs, internal beliefs, and possible causes of underachievement. The following diagram (Figure 1) is an overview of children’s underachievement.
Figure one is a representation of connecting the “total picture” of an underachiever. First, the diagram begins with the underachiever. The underachiever is often labeled through observable warning signs. Secondly, the underachiever is often identified through some probable cause for underachievement. For example, is the environment (i.e. home) conducive to learning? What obstacles are preventing the child from achieving? The obstacles are often environmental, physical or hereditary. Many times, a child’s motivation comes from these focus areas. The factors of motivation (level of autonomy, the child’s emotional environment, level of competency, and need for belonging and fun), readily contribute to the overall functioning of whether or not the child will achieve. From there, it is necessary to look at the most important part of the puzzle in underachievement— the child’s own internal world of perceptions and beliefs about his or her own self.

The second part of the paper will focus on types of motivation, factors influencing motivation, and the school counselor’s role in helping students. The last part of the paper addresses competency, belonging, and the need for fun in each underachieving child. Strategies for the school counselor to use are further explained through teaching techniques and self-monitoring.

Early Warning Signs of Underachievement in Students

School counselors must be alerted to the possible early warning signs in elementary-aged individuals with underachievement traits. Inattention, lack of productivity, and aggressive behavior are common concerns (Alderman, 1999; Hargis, 1997; Rathvon, 1996 ). This is a representation of the child’s unconscious attempt to communicate with teachers and parents that he or she is feeling overwhelmed by the
school experience and help is needed. The following signs of underachievement become increasingly observable over time and are not limited to: (a) performing well when given one-on-one attention but restless when required to work independently; (b) having trouble beginning and completing tasks; (c) withdrawing attention when parents or teachers give instructions; (d) becoming distracted or is distracting when he or she is not the center of attention; (e) has difficulty relating positively to peers and siblings; (f) displaying frequent temper outbursts; (g) requiring care-taking beyond the age when it is appropriate; (h) has difficulty organizing school materials; and (i) making excessive demands on others, and is never satisfied (Rathvon, 1996, p. 25).

The Internal World of the Underachiever

An underachiever’s thoughts, attitudes, and feelings are constructed at the core of infancy and early childhood. Most individuals have a working model that allows them to modify their views of themselves and others to match new experiences and challenges. However, the children who underachieve set rigid, maladaptive beliefs of themselves and others that leads to discontentment in themselves as well as parents and teachers (Stipek, 1998).

Beliefs and Perceptions of Underachievers

According to Pintrich (2000), there are four common beliefs of underachievers that “overpower” their own thought process.

Beliefs and perceptions

(1) The child has no control over what happens to him or her. One of the major characteristics of the underachiever is the failure to take responsibility for his or her own behavior. The refusal to take responsibility arises from the unconscious belief that the
child's own efforts do not affect the events or individuals in his world, a belief derived from early experience. If the child's efforts to form security are not acknowledged by the parents, the child tends to feel ignored and discouraged. If the parents' needs, rather than the child's needs are met, the child comes to believe that it does not matter what he or she does to strengthen learning.

(2) The child believes he or she needs to be rescued, but can not be saved. The underachiever believes that he or she must rely on someone to solve the obstacles because the child views himself as an incompetent individual who can act on his own behalf.

(3) The child has a view that if something is not perfect, it is awful. The underachiever looks at life in black and white; either it is perfection or failure. Depending on the child's experience, either his or her actions are gratifying or depriving to the parents. Teachers are helpful or mean. Peers are friendly or backstabbing. The underachiever sets up perfectionistic standards for himself. Setting lofty goals becomes reinforcing because it helps the child to counteract feelings of vulnerability.

(4) The child believes that growing up does not get him or her anywhere. The child's belief includes incompetence and feels unable to cope with the challenges of life. Instead of moving with confidence, the child feels inadequate. Independent work at school clearly symbolizes a stage in the life of the child that he is growing up. For the child, this period of development creates great fear (Pintrich, 2000).

Counselor's Role

The school counselor's role in helping underachievers is to recognize the maladaptive beliefs of the child and direct counseling sessions to change self-defeating
beliefs and behaviors (Heacox, 1991). Contrary, Rathvon (1996) advised that counselors should encourage parents and teachers to *change themselves*. Parents must learn more effective ways of communicating with their child. In turn, the distorted views and beliefs that the child has will be replaced with more adaptive views of himself.

Counselors may work with parents to carry out the following recommendations for the child. The suggestions include: (a) “allow” versus avoiding feelings; (b) “manage emotions” versus reacting; (d) “invite” versus interrogate; (e) “promote problem-solving” versus giving advice; and (f) “constructive” versus destructive encouragement (Rathvon, 1996, p. 125). In order to help parents establish the necessary modules of positive thinking, it is necessary for parents to be well informed of the possible causes of underachievement.

**Possible Causes of Underachievement**

Many researchers, physicians, and educators have their own ideas of what causes underachievement in children. Possible causes of underachievement include allergies (Alderman, 1999), food additives and hypersensitivity to sound (Reeve, 1996), early and late onset of puberty (Rathvon, 1996; Ruggiero, 1998), hormonal imbalance, low and high metabolism (Mandel & Marcus, 1995), visual tracking problems (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002), and many others that all include a physical cause and a medical solution. On the contrary, professionals including teachers and counselors, as well as parents may become submerged into a search for a non-psychological cause of underachievement to avoid considering ineffective parenting skills or classroom practices.

For parents, the first step in addressing underachievement is to have the child be evaluated by a family physician for a complete exam. Such evaluations may form a
diagnosis in loss of hearing or sight, which would greatly influence achievement within the classroom. In addition, counselors consult with teachers with questions that are designed specifically to help identify underachievers (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002, p. 221).

1. Does the child ask for help in ineffective ways, either by asking too often or by not asking for help when the child needs it?

2. Does the child have trouble completing work?

3. Does the child work well when the teacher is near and then shut down when the teacher moves away?

4. Does the child give up easily on new or challenging tasks?

5. Does the child interpret feedback about work as criticism?

6. Does the child fail to hand in homework?

7. Does the child appear capable of doing better work in class?

If the counselor and teacher answer “yes” to three or more questions, this is an indication that underachievement may exist and obtaining a psychological evaluation is recommended. For the vast majority of underachievers, the results of testing do not reveal any learning disabilities or emotional problems that can be justified for placement into a special program. Instead, special education program committees concluded that motivation, rather than learning problems, is the cause of the child’s poor achievement in school (Mandel & Marcus, 1995).

**Early Beginnings of Motivation**

**Attachment Theory**

Underachievement has its beginnings and basis from attachment theory, developmental psychology, learning, and motivation theory. John Bowlby and Mary
Ainsworth (1988) proposed that all human beings are motivated to form close emotional bonds, or attachments, with other human beings throughout their lives, and that one's capacity to form attachments has a great deal to do with one's ability to function effectively in the world. "People who have secure, loving attachments are able to accept and give help to others, develop satisfying relationships, and pursue their goals with confidence and enthusiasm. In contrast, those who do have difficulty forming secure attachments develop a distrust of their own worth and competence and the willingness of others to help them meet their needs" (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 1988, p. 13.).

Children who are plagued by chronic feelings of emptiness, dissatisfaction, and anxiety are unable to reach their potential or to develop and maintain satisfying relationships with others. According to attachment theory, the ability to form attachments is based on the interactions that children have with their parents and other caretakers during infancy and childhood. In order to have secure attachment, a child must feel safe and cared for, and they must feel supported and validated for their efforts to explore the world.

For many children, finding a secure base of attachment is not easy. Many parents and caregivers are unable to obtain the kind of security and validation they needed as children from their own families. When they become parents, their own lack of a secure base during the child's development and lack of support from others present in their lives makes it a challenge to provide their children with consistent encouragement that is internalized (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002).
Differentiated Motivation

Children's motivation becomes more differentiated and complex throughout the childhood years. This differentiation begins quite early (Small, 2000). Even as early as first grade, children begin to develop a differentiated set of beliefs, values, and goals about specific activities. Therefore, a child may feel confident about one subject in school, and a weaker sense of competence and less interest in another subject area.

As children's beliefs, values, and goals relate more closely to their performance, motivation and behavior become more closely linked. Researchers continue to study this relationship, and many agree that this relationship becomes reciprocal over time with motivation influencing achievement and vice versa (Bandura, 1997). Instead of "which causes which," the overall view is to gain a better understanding of mutual influences of motivation and achievement behaviors.

Defining Motivation

According to Raffini (1996), motivation is the study of internal process that gives behavior its energy and direction. Rathvon (1996) commented that motivation originated from the internal processes of needs, cognitions, and emotions. The internal processes energize and direct behavior in various ways such as starting, sustaining, intensifying, focusing, and stopping behavior. Goldstein and Mather (1998) defined motivation as the ability to think and process despite opposing forces.

Intrinsic

Simply stated, intrinsic motivation is choosing to do an activity for no compelling reason (Raffini, 1996). The desire to seek challenges is at the core of intrinsic motivation. "This motivation is fueled by the student's needs to control their own
decisions (autonomy), to do things that help them feel successful (competence), and to feel a part of something larger than themselves (belonging), to feel good about who they are (self-esteem), and to find pleasure in what they do (involvement and stimulation)” (Raffini, 1996, p.3).

Factors Influencing Motivation

Autonomy

Children have an innate need to feel autonomous and have control over their lives (Alderman, 1999; Freiberg, 1997; Heacox, 1991). Self-determination is achieved when individuals are free to behave, engage in activities because they want to, and have choices without being coerced to behave according to the desire of another.

Within the classroom, teachers often use rewards and punishments to control students’ behavior. Rewards and punishment may serve as a vehicle that influences and controls student learning; however, self-determination is stifled when another controls decisions (Pajares, 1996; Slavin, 1995).

School counselors often consult with teachers concerning the motivation of students and the importance of logical consequences. When consequences rather than punishment are used, students tend to look at other viewpoints of their inappropriate behavior. Raffini (1996) suggested that as students lose their sense of self-determination, they subside to control over what, how, and when behavior is to be performed.
School Counselor's Role for Enhancing Student Autonomy

Enhancing Autonomy

Raffini (1996) compiled a list of recommendations for counselors to use with teachers to help enhance student autonomy within the classroom. The list follows:

1. When several learning activities meet the same objective, allow students to choose. Even though it may be more difficult for the teacher, this method will help build self-determination;
2. Allow students to decide how to implement classroom procedures that are not critical. A choice in itself, no matter the size, is beneficial for all students;
3. Provide students with opportunities to decide when, where, and in what order to complete assignments. A flexible teacher helps to foster self-determination;
4. Create a psychologically safe environment in which students are willing to risk making choices. Protect students from ridicule and criticism of others and remind students that making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process;
5. Take time to provide clear and logical explanations of the reasoning behind students' restrictions. Saying, “Because I said so!” is not good enough;
6. When behavior is restricted, acknowledge conflicting feelings. Students need to know that his or her emotions are understood;
7. When behavior is restricted, use minimal sufficient controls. By using the least control possible, teachers will increase the likelihood that students will internalize the necessity for the restriction or requirement;
8. Use logical consequences rather than punishment when a student's behavior makes it difficult to teach others. Punishment places responsibility on the teacher, whereas helping students to assume ownership for their behavior empowers the child;
to set individual goals. This allows the students to be in charge of their own aspirations; and (10) Try to avoid making students right, wrong, good, or bad for their actions. Instead, hold them accountable for the consequences of their choices. (p.17)

**Emotional Environment**

School counselors may also consult with parents to help provide a supportive emotional environment for the child. Goldstein and Mather (1998) suggested that one of eleven steps to providing a rich emotional environment is to make certain that there is balance in the child's life. Children often feel “trapped” with school problems as they spend a great deal of time completing school work. Children end up feeling that they do little beyond making a finished product in a subject that doesn’t matter to them. Children tend not to spend much time on the activities that they enjoy.

Bandura (1997) advised that the emotional environment variables are composed of self-focused thoughts such as beliefs about one’s own competence. These approaches include: (1) causal attributions- reasons why we succeed or fail; (2) self-efficacy- beliefs about own competence to perform a task; (3) learned helplessness- a feeling and belief about hopelessness in a situation; (4) thoughts about goals- the extent to which we focus on a goal to learn or as a reflection of ability; and (5) self-worth- a concern with protecting perceptions of our own ability. (p. 154)

**Competency**

**Developing Competency**

The more students feel successful when performing an activity, the more intrinsically motivated they will be to persist in the activity (Ford, 1995; Raffini, 1996;
Reynolds, 1994). Creating an environment where all students can discover their effort toward learning will help them to attain academic competence. Academic achievement varies among children, but the value lies when the children have access to the feelings of competence that comes from achievement. The child must be able to conceptualize what makes him happy, what he or she is proud of, and why his efforts were deemed important.

School Counselor’s Role in Helping Children Develop Competency

Raffini (1996) suggested that counselors must use individual goal-setting strategies to allow students to define their own criteria for success. Allowing students the opportunity to decide their own task empowers them to define their standard for success. Counselors may consult with teachers to help match learning tasks and the pace of learning to the skill level of the individual student.

Bandura (1993) pointed out that students are more likely to undertake tasks that they believe they have the skills to handle, but avoid tasks students believe require greater skills than they possess. Therefore, school counselors must aid students in discovering their own reflected ability level as well as pay particular attention to the beliefs of that ability.

Need for Belonging

Human behavior is in a social context, and the need to develop a sense of social and psychological belonging is a major challenge of childhood (Zimmerman, 1995). A “lack of motivation” that is seen in the classroom may be rooted from a real or imagined fear of being isolated or rejected by peers. As Dreikurs (1989) and Ladson-Billings
(1994) warned, there are few influences in a student's life more powerful than the feeling of being rejected by others.

Students come from a variety of economic, racial, and social backgrounds. Children are continuously searching and highly motivated to secure "a place" within the group. Children may gather their sense of belonging and acceptance by conforming to the social expectations of others or become discouraged by their attempts to gain acceptance. Being unsuccessful in obtaining social belonging leads to negative alternative methods for gaining status such as class clown, defiant rebel, the teacher's pet, and the vicious bully. Deci and Ryan (1985) proposed a model of student motivation in which students felt better about themselves and were more intrinsically motivated and engaged in learning when they felt connected with schoolmates, teachers, and parents.

School Counselor's Strategies for Increasing Belonging in Children

One way to impact students is to find something that the children can take ownership in (Ruggiero, 1998). For example, many families today do not require household chores and duties carried out by their children. Parents may find that it is too much of a hassle, or chores would be completed much faster and more efficiently if they just did them alone. However, it is speculated that because of the shift in North American family duties, there is less of an "ownership" within the family. Children do not understand their "role" in the family or the importance of being a family unit. A sense of belonging within the family is lost.

School counselors, therefore, can facilitate discussion with the child to put his or her strengths to work. Research has shown that when a child at-risk is given the opportunity to care for someone, teach someone, or help someone out, the child will gain
a sense of appreciation for his own self (Stipek & Seal, 2001). It is quite likely that intrinsic motivation will increase in the process of a child gaining his own sense of self-worth. School counselors may encourage teachers to use feedback procedures to assess and discuss the interpersonal climate and personality of the classroom. Intrinsic motivation is strengthened when students have the opportunity to assess how well they are doing in meeting their academic and interpersonal needs (Reeve, 1993).

School Counselor’s Emphasis on Building Students’ Self-Esteem

To increase the chances of enhancing positive self-esteem, counselors and teachers must begin with the classroom environment. The classroom environment must nurture human integrity, character, and accountability. This is a difficult task for the insecure and self-doubted students. However, counselors and teachers must provide activities that will help students experience their uniqueness, learn skills of empathic listening, and assume responsibility for their own behavior.

The School Counselor’s Role in Aiding Student’s Need For Fun

Glasser (1990) emphasized that all humans have a basic need for fun through activities that provide physical, social, cognitive, or psychological pleasure. In order for students to be intrinsically motivated, counselors must collaborate with teachers to redefine enjoyment in learning. Counselors and teachers must redesign the process of learning curriculum so that it fits the students’ need for enjoyment and involvement. Raffini (1996) researched children who were highly motivated to work in classrooms and found that the desire for involvement came from the teachers who were most enthusiastic about their course content and found ways to make the learning activities interesting.
Several recommendations are given to counselors and teachers to stimulate student interest and enjoyment. The list follows: (1) assess students’ interests, hobbies, and extracurricular activities. Professionals must be knowledgeable about interests and content; (2) use divergent questions and brainstorming to increase involvement. Questions without right or wrong answers encourage creative thinking; (3) support spontaneity. Spontaneity reinforces academic interest; (4) support instruction with humor, anecdotes, personal experiences, and/or incidental information. Students are receptive to humorous concepts because it relates to their own emotions and lives; and (5) vary instructional activities while maintaining the curriculum’s focus. Students look forward to change, and therefore, increases motivation (Raffini, 1996, p. 232).

Learning and Meta-Cognitive Strategies

Self-regulated learners use learning strategies to achieve in school. Many times, children who are struggling in school lack strategies to learn, which greatly influences the motivation that the child has for the subject area. School counselors and teachers work together to help the child discover how he or she learns best. Eight categories of learning strategies are addressed (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Basic Rehearsal</td>
<td>Repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Complex rehearsal</td>
<td>Copying or highlighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Basic elaboration</td>
<td>Creating a mental image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Complex elaboration</td>
<td>Relating prior knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Basic organization</td>
<td>Grouping and categorizing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6) Complex organization
Creating outlines to show relationships

7) Comprehension monitoring
Self-questioning to check understanding

8) Affective and motivational
Use of self-talk to reduce anxiety

Self-Monitoring

Teaching children to learn to self-monitor may be a part of a school counselor's role when helping children with low motivation. Self-monitoring requires a student to attend to on-task behavior and then self-record and self-evaluate (Zimmerman, 1995). Self-monitoring serves as a tool for self-improvement and enhances learning in several ways: (a) increases selective attention by focusing on a limited number of responses; (b) helps students determine how effective performance was; (c) enhances management and use of time; and (d) lets students know the effectiveness of the learning strategy and what he or she may do differently next time. (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 52)

A self-monitoring homework sheet for elementary students was designed by Zimmerman (1995) to help school counselors and teachers aid students in their own accountability of completing schoolwork. (p. 132)

Self-Monitoring Homework Guide

1. Did I write my assignment down? Yes No

2. What do I need to take home?
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 

  

Emphasizing a collaborative approach to foster children's learning is of central focus. Because school counselors are readily available in elementary schools to help students with individual needs, the school counselor plays a significant role in aiding children who are underachievers to amplify the student's strengths, build on learning styles and strategies, and create environments where the child is able to be intrinsically motivated. By exploring one's self-identity and awareness, the child will grow to become a self-regulated learner who is empowered to build upon his or her success as an avid contributor within the classroom and society.

Conclusion

Raising students to love learning rests with the parents, teachers, and counselor. Firsthand, a childhood that is welcomed and fostered with love, understanding, and support from parents will truly benefit the child (Rathvon, 1996). Children deeply desire to succeed in learning. Therefore, parents and educators must be well equipped to lay the foundation for success. It is advantageous that educators and counselors recognize the causes for underachievement and progress forward to the early warning signs and the internal world of the underachieving child. Secondly, highly effective teachers and counselors will create an environment for the learner to move onward, despite setbacks that the child may face throughout the learning process (Schunk, 1995). This may be accomplished through understanding a child's need for autonomy, nurturing the emotional environment, competency, belonging, and fun. Lastly, counselors are in a
unique position to counsel children one-on-one and provide a safe environment to guide the child into self-exploration. Through self-exploration and the helpful contribution of parents, educators, and counselors, the child begins to discover that he or she is motivated to achieve.
References


