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Underachievement in gifted students

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Underachievement in gifted students

Abstract

This study reflected on literature concerning gifted students who underachieve in school. Its purpose was to review the literature to examine the various definitions of underachievement, the characteristics of gifted underachievers, the risk factors for underachievement related to gifted students and the existence of promising interventions to ameliorate underachievement. The writer concluded that underachievement is a discrepancy related to performance behaviors that can be changed. She found that positive change can best be accomplished by the use of individualized interventions involving both the school and the family.

UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN GIFTED STUDENTS

A Graduate Review
Submitted to the
Division of Education of the Gifted
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Deborah Langenderfer Nagle

Summer, 1998

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Abstract

This study reflected on literature concerning gifted students who underachieve in school. It's purpose was to review the literature to examine the various definitions of underachievement, the characteristics of gifted underachievers, the risk factors for underachievement related to gifted students and the existence of promising interventions to ameliorate underachievement. The writer concluded that underachievement is a discrepancy related to performance behaviors that can be changed. She found that positive change can best be accomplished by the use of individualized interventions involving both the school and the family.

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I would like to dedicate this work to my father, Bernard Langenderfer and my grandfather, Isadore Langenderfer. They both strongly believed in the value of education, especially for women.

Special thanks go to my family: Robert, Sean, Brendan, and Erin.

Change is work. However, without your active intervention and support, your underachieving student or child may never fulfill his or her potential. Turning failure into success is never easy. But it may be the greatest investment you can make in a child's future. (Heacox, 1991, p. 112)

Introduction and Rationale

Nine years ago I was offered a teaching assignment as a talented and gifted coordinator in a small, rural district. As I went through my decision-making process, I felt confident that I would never have to teach my own children, a factor which I thought would be a benefit for them. Four years later while testing the third, fifth, and eighth-grade students in my district, my son Brendan's name appeared on the Talent Identification Program at the third-grade level. After meeting with the district TAG committee, Brendan was selected to participate in the TAG program at my school. I had visited at length with the superintendent concerning teaching my own child and what the probable commentary would be about his participation in the program. My superintendent stated that if any student qualifies for the program under the district guideline, the student should receive services. With some reservation, I signed the papers for Brendan to become part of the program. I projected that there could be difficulties ahead for both of us. I was correct in my projections.

I have been Brendan's TAG teacher for the past three years. During his passage through elementary school, Brendan has demonstrated an advanced vocabulary. He is able to tell and remember complicated jokes and stories. Brendan also has scored well on all his standardized tests. However, for all this

creativity and advanced reading ability, Brendan does poorly in school. He sometimes is the student that a teacher will be happy to note is absent. Behavior and academic detentions are a weekly occurrence. He blames everyone else for his lack of success in school. He is embarrassed by the "C's" on his report card and the "needs to improve" check marks. "If only. . ." is a phrase that goes through my mind so often when dealing with Brendan or listening to one of his teachers explain why he is not achieving.

At first I thought Brendan might have dysgraphia or some visual/spatial problem. His symptoms were those of an underachiever caught in the underachievement syndrome. He demonstrated poor penmanship, demonstrated difficulty placing his ideas on paper, and preferred to communicate verbally. His attitudes, behaviors and skills simply did not mix well in the traditional self-contained classrooms, and that poor mixture proved to be a major source of frustration for Brendan. Because of Brendan's experience, I began to reflect on the problems of the gifted and talented underachiever in the classroom. These reflections led me to investigate possible interventions for him and other underachieving gifted students I have taught. I began to research strategies that might prove successful to students who were identified as gifted, yet would not, or could not, achieve in school. I found that there were many varied opinions and possible interventions for this problem. With this personal purpose in mind, I then sought the expertise of those who have experienced the problem and the challenge of underachievement in gifted students as a whole.

The number of gifted and talented students who are considered academic underachievers are staggering. Sally Reis (1998) estimates that between two and ten percent of high school gifted students are presently underachieving. Reis goes on to cite A Nation at Risk (1983) which estimates

that over half of the gifted population do not have a match between academic areas, tested abilities and achievement. Diane Heacox (1991) suggested that the percentage of underachieving gifted students could be as high as fifty percent. Davis and Rimm (1991) reminded us that ten to twenty percent of the high school dropouts have potential abilities in the gifted range. Clark (1992) estimated that, due to variations in testing and the assessment of those tests, up to seventy percent of the gifted students could be considered underachievers. These statistics make it clear that underachievement is regarded as a widespread problem. It affects students across cultural, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is especially frustrating to the gifted, who are individuals that many times feel frustrated by the academic systems of school. They are among the students who just do not fit into the educational blueprints that schools lay out for them to follow. Thus, as Silverman (1993) stated, giftedness and underachievement reflect a complex multi-problem phenomenon.

My personal experience with underachievement as a parent and as a teacher and brief examination of the impact of underachievement on student achievement made me more aware of the seriousness of this syndrome. It also raised more questions and resulted in this review of the literature.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of my study was to review the literature to determine and analyze the definitions of underachievement, establish major characteristics of gifted underachievers, ascertain the risk factors for underachievement related to gifted students, and identify promising interventions used to ameliorate underachievement in gifted students.

As a parent and as an educator, I raised the following questions:

1. How does the reviewed literature define underachievement?
2. What are major characteristics of gifted underachievers as identified in the reviewed literature?
3. What are the risk factors for gifted underachievement as defined in the reviewed literature?
4. What interventions hold promise for ameliorating the problem of underachievement in gifted students according to the reviewed literature?

Assumptions

My review of the literature has assumed two beliefs as they apply to possible interventions to ameliorate underachievement in gifted students in the academic setting of the school. First, I believe that underachievement is not a myth. It is a real self-concept robbing issue that affects many gifted students. Second, I believe that there are specific strategies and interventions that can ameliorate underachievement for many students.

As an educator and as a parent, I need to see the underachiever as an individual, to recognize the characteristics that contribute to underachievement, and then to effect change for that individual through interventions that are need-specific. In order to ameliorate underachievement, the parent, the student, the school, and the community must be involved.

Methodology

A review of the contemporary literature was initiated to locate sources which emphasize information on underachievement among gifted students from the 1980's to the present. I was able to locate a variety of print sources from the Donald O. Rod Library at the University of Northern Iowa.

I began with an ERIC search using the descriptions underachievement, gifted, elementary school, secondary school, and achievement. I was able to obtain many sources in texts and professional journals. I also used the IAC database and the Ask ERIC web site for further sources within the field of education. Additional sources included bibliographies within various journal articles and books I examined. Textbooks on gifted education were particularly useful because most provide discussion on the subject of under-achievement.

I organized my sources around the questions of my purpose statement. This seemed the most natural fit to review and reflect on the syndrome of underachievement.

I used a color-coded number and file system to organize my review. The synthesis of this information was then used to reach conclusions and develop recommendations for the classroom teacher and parents who struggle to effect some change in their gifted students who underachieve.

This review represents an examination of (a) the various definitions of underachievement and an analysis of their similarities and differences; (b) an exploration of the characteristics of underachievement as they relate to the gifted child and the adolescent; (c) a discussion of the risk factors related to the problem of underachievement, and (d) a review and analysis of promising interventions to ameliorate gifted underachievement.

Analysis and Discussion

Ford (1996) has said that the potential and the motivation to achieve are inherent in all children and that no talent or potential should be left to atrophy. Her statements were important to me and caused much personal reflection on my part as I reviewed the literature for answers to the questions that I have raised. This section contains analysis and discussion of the reviewed literature from the viewpoint of definitions of underachievement, characteristics of the gifted underachiever, the risk factors inherent in gifted underachievement, and possible interventions for ameliorating this at-risk behavior.

Definitions of Underachievement

Whitmore (1980) defined underachievement as performance judged either by grades or achievement test scores, or both, that is significantly below the measured or demonstrated potential for academic achievement. She described the discrepancy in academic achievement as one or more years below actual grade level.

Howley, Howley, and Pendarvis (1986) described underachievement as achievement substantially below potential. They pointed out that often it is teachers who see unrealized potential in these students who choose not to achieve in school. Such a substantial discrepancy between achievement and expected performance in school, they felt, should be carefully diagnosed in order to determine the best forms of intervention to meet the individual needs of the underachieving gifted students.

Victor Cogen (1990) defined underachievers as normal children whose academic performance is significantly below their potential. He believed that underachievers do not necessarily fail, but that their grades fall short of

expectations. He emphasized the fact that underachievers have difficulty measuring up to the expectations of their families and their teachers. He also saw underachievement as a symptom of learning weaknesses, not a disability. These weaknesses can include organization skills, test anxiety, and peer relationships--issues that cause teachers, parents and students to overcome a hurdle that seems unnecessary.

Patricia Supplee (1992) defined the underachievement as a hint at exceptional ability and the lack of academic excellence. She stated that the underachiever finds school uncomfortable and stressful. Thus, for her, underachievement refers to children and adolescents who possess high academic potential but who are not functioning successfully in school. In other words, academic ability is present and low academic potential is shown.

James Gallagher (1991) saw underachievement as the failure to use all of one's intellectual capabilities. According to him, underachievement is a tragic disability for gifted individuals. He reiterates in numerous works that the idea of waste of human potential must be stopped because of the tragic consequences for our society due to the loss of unrealized potential. He thinks that this can be accomplished most effectively by identifying the students who are at risk for underachievement.

Diane Heacox (1991) in her guide, Up From Underachievement, referred to underachievement as behaviors demonstrated by the child who has the ability to do well in school but is failing miserably. No one, she pointed out, wants to fail. Therefore, success should not be beyond the reach of the underachiever. The underachiever wants school to be different.

Barbara Clark (1992) defined the underachieving gifted student as someone who has shown exceptional performance and who, nevertheless,

does not perform as well as expected for his or her age on school related tasks. She stated that, in most cases, the measure of test achievement and school performance shows a considerable amount of discrepancy.

Delisle (1992) defined underachievement as a set of learned behaviors that can change over time, that is content or situation specific and that is tied to self-concept development. He pointed out that there is really no consensus regarding the overall concept of what underachievement actually is, where it starts and where it ends. He called the definitions of underachievement "cloud cover". In other words, the real problem is not seen clearly through the clouds of educational practice as it relates to students and adolescents who are at risk of underachievement. Delisle has called the word "underachievement" a buzzword among educators. The mention of the word creates negative images surrounding the student in question.

Gary Davis and Sylvia Rimm (1998) defined underachievement as a discrepancy between the child's performance and some index of his or her actual ability. They cite other studies that use the discrepancy between potential and productivity as the essence of the definitions.

Examination and analysis of these definitions show some common denominators. One of these denominators is the frequent use of the word discrepancy. As defined by Webster (1988), the word refers to a lack of agreement or differing view points, and it is the most often used in definitions of underachievement. The discrepancy that exists in underachievement is the difference between the ability, capacity, or potential to learn and the performance or productivity that does not reflect real potential or intellectual capacities. A second denominator is the focus on underachievement as an inability to meet suggested expectations of those who evaluate productivity. A

third common denominator is that underachievement is not considered a disability or personal failure; rather it is a learning weakness related to performance behaviors that can be changed. The final denominator is the principle that underachievement is an individual problem, and, as a result, rules and levels cannot be standardized or applied to every situation.

At this point, I have examined the similarities and differences of the possible definitions of underachievement and have established some common denominators among the models. The next step is to explore the many characteristics attributed to gifted children and adolescents.

Characteristics of Underachievement

The characteristics that profile the student who is considered an underachiever are many. In this examination of the underachievement literature, I found that the issue of poor self-esteem often was part of the profile of the student who is underachieving. Students with self-esteem issues did not relate well with teachers or peers, were plagued with doubts and did not take the risks necessary to achieve in school.

Heacox (1991) described the underachiever as a student who cannot or will not play the school game. Gifts and talents are often hidden by low performance. She pointed out that underachieving students give up before they start. They seldom, if ever, give themselves or school the chances they deserve.

Whitmore (1980) explained that the gifted are vulnerable to underachievement because they exhibit the characteristics of poor mental health and social adjustment. She felt that the highly gifted are the most vulnerable to underachievement. Through her work, two basic patterns of

underachieving emerged: aggression or withdrawal. She characterized the aggressive student as one who would refuse, disturb and seek attention. The withdrawn student is one who does little to communicate, daydreams and does very little work.

In later research, Whitmore (1990) listed poor test-taking skills, problems with daily work, unrealistic self-expectations and difficulty in peer relationships as characteristics which can lead to underachievement. Interestingly, she found that an organized period of observation which was at least two weeks in length was needed to determine if a student really is exhibiting the characteristics of underachievement.

Victor Cogen (1990) identified fear of failure, fear of goal-setting and fear of taking any type of risk, as major characteristics of the underachiever. He stated that the underachiever is often too bright and marches to a different drummer. He also provided examples of underachievement and their relationship to problems in school. For example, Thomas Edison was always different but learned to fit in without hurting his creativity in spite of the educational system. Frank Lloyd Wright's diary shows an educational career that was plagued by boredom and the lack of challenge that lasted into the college years.

Heacox, (1991) identified the characteristics of underachievement through identification with a group of fictitious children. Shank, the rebel, is the one who keeps the power struggle going at home and at school. Then there is Dana, the conformist, who hides her abilities from parents and teachers. Jenny is the underachiever who is stressed out and seeking perfection. Next, there is Maria who is bored and tired of doing the same things everyday. Finally, there is Yolanda, who is motivated in a single area, just science, nothing more.

Through these models, Heacox presented a clear picture of the different types of underachievement found in children and adolescents.

Barbara Clark (1992) described underachievement in a compilation of characteristics that can be used to identify children and adolescents who underachieve in school. Her list is taken from the commonalities of the twenty-five studies she examined to determine a set of possible characteristics of underachieving students. The list includes family rejection in some form, poor study habits, test-taking ability, and peer-relationship problems. The list also includes the characteristics of low leadership status, less persistence, less assertiveness, withdrawal, and feelings of being victimized as well as hostility towards adult authority.

James Delisle (1992) has etched his list of characteristics of the gifted underachiever in "soap, not stone". He asks that the characteristics be a guide, not a gospel for identifying the underachiever. Delisle cites a 1961 study of ninety research studies reviewed by Ralph and Tannenbaum, who found that there was no one explanation of underachievement, no specific characteristics. Delisle then makes a distinction between the underachiever and the nonproducer. The underachiever, he says, is a student at risk, dependent and reactive, who requires intervention. On the other hand, the nonproducer's performance varies with the teacher and the subject. This student tends to rebel, but little intervention is needed to effect change.

Delisle believed that both the underachiever and the nonproducer may have socialization problems. Therefore, he said, both the underachiever and the nonproducer need to change their behavior and their attitudes. He saw performance, or the lack of it, as the major indicator for underachievement and indicated that underachievement is in the eye of the beholder. If the expected

performance does not measure up to what the expected potential, the student is considered an underachiever. The nonproducer is caught in situations that lead to poor performance that is most often short-term in nature.

Donna Ford's (1996) research dealt with minority gifted students and their special needs and underachievement in school. Her list of characteristics of the underachiever included negative self-perceptions, racial identity questions, negative attitudes toward school and courses, motivation issues, test anxiety and learning styles. Ford was concerned that schools in general fail to make accommodations for such attitudes and behaviors. She said that black students do not meet with success in school because their attitudes and behaviors are similar to the attitudes and behaviors of the underachiever. However, the underachieving black student is perceived to be strictly oppositional in behavior and is regarded as a behavior problem instead of an underachiever in need of specific intervention.

Sylvia Rimm (1995) stated that underachievers come in many varieties, and each should be treated as an individual. She has created several fictional composite profiles using dependence, dominance, and conformity. The main differences in the profiles is the degree to which underachievement extends into the school and life of the underachiever. All individuals achieve less than they are capable of at one time or another. The syndrome comes into play when the underachievement becomes a habitual way of handling school. Rimm (1995) said that since all children fail, they need to know how to cope with failure.

Davis and Rimm (1998) believed that children are not born underachievers. Rather, they said, underachievement was a learned behavior. They felt that observation was the best way to spot the often subtle characteristics that make up the individual who was underachieving in school.

They found that teachers and parents who are aware of the characteristics of underachievers can make important observations which will help to identify the syndrome in children for which they are responsible. They also mentioned learned helplessness, avoidance behaviors and extreme rebellion as other possible characteristics that can be present in the underachiever. These behaviors, if left unchecked, can, over time, lead to underachievement.

From this review, a common profile of the gifted underachiever emerges. Examining all the points of view and using my experiences as an educator and as a parent, I have characterized gifted underachievers as children and adolescents who have a learning weakness, not a learning disability. They suffer from a discrepancy between performance and actual ability. Such a discrepancy may be caused or enhanced by a lack of self-esteem, which, for them, is an outcome of a number of concurrent factors such as school, parents, and the environment. This, in turn, shows a number of behaviors which can be perceived as negative by their parents, teachers, and peers. Underachievers tend to shift the responsibility of school from themselves to others. They conceal their abilities and feel that they are never good enough. Those feelings may be manifested in perfectionism or in setting unrealistic goals.

They do enough to get by and will not take on a challenge even though concurrently they complain of boredom. The underachievers often blame everyone and every situation for their lack of success in school whether they fault the fact that they are black, female, handicapped, or have a set of unreasonable family problems. All these issues seem to descend on the underachiever and prevent achievement in school. Thus the characteristics that profile the underachiever are roadblocks to success in school.

Risk Factors for Underachievement

Children and adolescents who exhibit the characteristics of the gifted underachiever are considered to be children and adolescents at risk. This means that, by being at risk, they exhibit certain behaviors that can lead to underachievement in school.

Howley, Howley, and Pendarvis (1986) cited surface behaviors and family problems as factors for risk of underachievement. They pointed out that surface problems such as test or subject anxiety seem to increase the discrepancy between ability and achievement. From the viewpoint of family problems, they observed that the home environment is too pressured, fails to foster role modeling, or is considered culturally or socially lacking. These situations, they said, can lead to underachievement. They also cited a study of men who did not reach their expected potential in which the risk factor of the dysfunctional family included a lack of self-confidence and perseverance. Such attitudes tend to fit the profile of underachievement.

James Delisle (1992) moved beyond the risk factors of surface behaviors and family behaviors when he used the phrase "the name of the game is blame". Blame, he said, is another risk factor for underachievement. Blame should not rest solely on the student. In such cases the school, the family, and the student are busy trying to place blame for an individual's lack of achievement in school and the real issue of finding an intervention to ameliorate the underachievement is lost. He also (1994) saw the label underachiever as a presumption of guilt. Just hinting at underachievement, he reported, often labels a student for life. Underachievement is everyone's problem.

Time also has been identified as a risk factor for underachievement. For example, the reviewed literature indicated that the earlier the intervention, the better the success rate for reversal of the syndrome. Rimm (1986) stated that underachievement becomes a pattern of behavior that can continue to decline and needs to be broken in order to have a reversal of underachievement. She (1998) explained that in younger children the discrepancy between achievement and performance is often over-looked because it is measured in terms of months and years. Due to this, valuable time is lost for possible interventions of underachievement. Rimm (1986) has referred to the family as a major risk factor for underachievement. She has found when the parenting style doesn't match the student, there is a risk of underachieving. Her belief is illustrated by a cartoon in her book, Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades (1996), which shows a mother to the right, a father to the left, and a child in between being pulled two ways. She pointed out that this blame factor has been proven over time at the Family Achievement Center in Wisconsin. Her years of work with underachieving families have shown that the influence of the family is a major risk factor for underachievement.

Whitmore (1980) stated that society and our troubled times may account for the development of underachievement. Americans, she warned, cannot afford to lose these priceless human resources through neglect. The family and the community also were identified as important components in the achievement or underachievement of gifted students and adolescents in their many arenas. Silverman (1993) also credited dysfunctional families as another piece of the family pie that are risks for underachievement. However, through family interventions, she felt that underachievement can even be prevented for some students. She suggested that families should be identified by their

strengths and weaknesses and then together move towards achievement for their underachieving student.

Silverman (1993) has stated that the school environment may not be the appropriate learning environment for students who are at risk of school failure. Learning styles and learning rates are ignored and special populations are undeserved. She cited a study of gifted high school dropouts by Seely in 1988. The study interviewed twelve high school drop-outs to determine what the common factors were for their unsuccessful school careers. One conclusion was that the academic work was too easy, boring, and repetitive for these students. The researchers felt that teachers focused on the weaknesses of the students instead of their strengths. Students were not treated with respect and were given little responsibility. Teachers and counselors were found too often to use punitive measures with underachievers. The slogan "shape up or ship out" was part of the philosophy and language of those teachers and counselors.

Rimm (1995) explained that each student has a learned behavior pattern that allows for effort in academic areas. She warned educators about the negative coping skills that can form if students are not successful in school. Educators are charged with the difficult task of unlocking potential in the wide array of student abilities that arrive at the door of their school. Educators are asked to be able to pin-point the student by student-specific characteristics and risk factors so that underachievement can be ameliorated.

Whitmore (1990) tapped low-level curriculum as a risk factor for underachievement. She pointed out that curriculum that is too easy or that provides no challenge has been linked to underachievement among the gifted. Students can often bluff their way through a course with common sense and prior knowledge. Indeed, in school, poor curriculum and management systems

create an environment for underachievement. The lack of programming and courses for the gifted also contribute to underachievement. Van Tassel-Baska (1989) studied school curricula and found that 78.8% of the schools she surveyed did not differentiate programs or services for the disadvantaged, at-risk, or the gifted populations. Organization and study skills also can suffer when low-level curriculum is presented which can lead to the behaviors of underachievement.

Whitmore listed the number one factor in student achievement in school as that of good role models. The role models are the parents, teachers, and the community at large, all showing their interest and willingness to support in their personal and academic goals. Caring, respectful adults in a student's life are vital for the amelioration of underachievement.

The reviewed literature showed that being male is another risk factor for underachievement. Supplee (1990) found no difference in the population she served in the Underachieving Gifted Program. Rimm (1998) stated that most of her clients at the Family Achievement Center were male. Reis (1998) found through her research on elementary underachievement studies that more boys than girls were identified as underachievers about 90% of the time.

Cogen (1990) has indicated that the whole system needs a complete overhaul. He stated that schools themselves are caught in underachievement. He also cited the fact that many children succeed in school, but many do not. Through better and improved identification and assessment measures, underachieving behaviors can be caught early before they become old habits that are hard to break.

Colangelo and Davis (1991) cited a 1988 Rimm and Lowe study of twenty-two families each of which came to the Family Achievement Center in

Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, to seek assistance with a child who was underachieving in school.

In the twenty-two families the following risk factors emerged. In 95% of the families, the underachiever manipulated one or both of the parents. Data showed that these parents often married in their thirties and had dissimilar parenting styles. They were poor motivational role models; rarely did they model any type of intrinsic learning. The atmosphere for learning in these homes was poor. Ninety percent of the families had an oppositional relationship with the school which led to poor communication. Another risk factor cited in the Rimm and Lowe study was peer acceptance problems. In 73% of the students which, in turn, could be linked to self-esteem issues. The underachievers depended on their parents 59% of the time to do their homework. The researchers thus laid part of the blame at the feet of parents for underachievement.

Supplee (1990) has instructed parents and teachers to take control of the risk factors that have brought about underachievement. Indeed, Rimm (1986), Supplee (1990), and Silverman (1993) all call for the need for honest and ongoing communication between the family and the school. Whether in the form of individual teacher communication, family or group counseling or parent initiated conversation, the more open the lines of communication, the more possible the reversal of underachievement.

The reviewed literature revealed several risk factors for underachievement. The family, the school, the individual student, and issues of blame emerged as the risky areas for underachievement. As we know, the family is the first teacher. If that home is not a safe nurturing learning environment, underachievement may occur. The parents in that home also hold

the key to the prevention of underachievement. Parents need to be on the same page with each other and the school. The school also should be a safe, challenging environment where all the needs of all the students are met. If the school does not measure up to these standards, underachievement will follow. If the student is male or harbors poor self-esteem issues, he or she is at risk of underachievement.

Possible Interventions

The reviewed literature has provided a number of definitions which, when combined, provide a perspective as to what is involved in underachievement. It also has provided an overview of some of the major risk factors which may lead to underachievement. At this point, it is well to examine some strategies for intervention that can ameliorate the problem of underachievement.

The literature indicated that there are some general approaches to intervention which have provided a positive impact in overcoming underachievement. One of these is the use of counseling as a necessary component to successful amelioration. (Delisle, 1990; Silverman, 1993). Individual, peer group, or family counseling have been suggested as viable options.

Counseling models have also proven useful in ameliorating underachievement in gifted students. There are many opinions as to the effectiveness of individual, peer group, or family counseling that deals with the issues related to underachievement. Delisle (1990, 1992) feels that counseling for underachievers is a necessary component to successful amelioration of underachievement. Program modifications are possible through counseling

programs at schools. Students can have the opportunity to negotiate independent studies, alternative assignments, and systematic curriculum compacting (Lemely, 1994). There are many opinions as to the effectiveness of individual, peer group, or family counseling that deals with the issues related to underachievement. Delisle (1990, 1992) feels that counseling for underachievers is a necessary component to successful amelioration of underachievement. Dr. Linda Silverman (1993) has proven that counseling is an effective tool to reverse underachievement, through her work at the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado.

Dr. Joyce Van Tassel-Baska (1990) concluded that the problem of underachievement is renewed by the fact that few teachers, counselors, psychologists working with the gifted recognize the uniqueness of their affective needs. She cited a counseling model used at Homewood-Flossmoor High School in Flossmoor, Illinois, as an excellent example of how counseling can initiate positive change for the high school underachiever. In this case, students were expected to enroll in programs that would challenge their abilities and identified interests. Students were asked to explore colleges, learn test-taking skills and explore career options through independent study and internships. This was to prepare students to face the challenges beyond high school. Through this model, it was hoped that the gifted underachievers would find shelter and the tools to explore themselves and future options.

A second general intervention is that of being aware of the expectations and perceptions of success often haunt the student who is underachieving. Both parents and teachers can hold high expectations of performance based upon belief in individual capability, but at the same time they hold perceptions of lack of motivation and goal setting. Also, a student's self perception

concerning his or her ability to succeed academically creates conflicting perceptions and lessens the possibilities for success (Cogen, 1992). The famous Pygmalion Effect study has shown how erroneous beliefs and perceptions about people and situations can create their eventual fulfillment (Kolb, 1993).

Gifted girls are often prisoners of such expectations. McCormick and Wolf (1993) stated that gifted and talented females have been found to be at risk of academic underachievement at the onset of adolescence, especially in mathematics and science. They surveyed the literature over a fifteen year period to examine the expectations and stereotypes that lead to underachievement in gifted girls. They found that positive teacher expectations and intervention programs were successful in steering girls away from the behaviors of underachievement.

A third general intervention strategy discussed in the literature could be placed under the general category of programming/curriculum. For example, Lemely (1994) discussed the idea that underachieving students should be given the opportunity to negotiate independent studies, alternate assignments and systematic curriculum compacting. Authors such as Weinbrenner (1992) and Galbraith (1996) have pointed out that curriculum moving at a faster pace with depth and challenge is a way to keep gifted students challenged, including those individuals who can be identified as underachievers. Rimm (1992) promoted early entrance into kindergarten or even grade skipping if implemented and assessed carefully. She cited longitudinal studies that confirm the benefits of carefully thought out acceleration for the underachiever. Fehrenbach (1993) stated that gifted pull-out opportunities can be set up to match goals and interests that are highly motivating for this group of individuals.

A fourth general intervention factor is one that is mentioned in the reviewed literature with great frequency and plays a role in the other strategies already discussed: the classroom teacher. June Maker (1982) saw the need for teachers to look critically at themselves. Maker believed that teachers need the qualities of empathy and understanding when working with underachievers. They must be willing to celebrate the little successes. She also stated that classroom teachers are often untrained to recognize the underachiever and, many times, to teach the coping skills and self-management that are vital to overcoming the syndrome. Teachers need to be trained to recognize the risk factors and characteristics of underachievement so that the student receive the services necessary to reverse the syndrome. Kolb (1993) has made the assertion that engaging the accuracy of beliefs teachers hold about their students will help classroom teachers to determine which expectations can be used to enrich, rather than to compare, the school experience of underachieving gifted students. Rimm (1995) has warned teachers about the negative coping skills that can be formed if students are not successful in school. She charged them with the difficult task of unlocking potential in the wide array of student abilities that arrive at the school door. They must, she said, be able to pin-point the student specific characteristics and risk factors so that underachievement can be ameliorated.

The final general intervention is that of parent involvement as esteem builders and role models. Supplee (1990), concluded that parents are critical components in effecting the kind of change the gifted underachiever needs. As stated in Davis and Rimm (1998), the parent plays a powerful role in modeling and creating the environment for achievement. It is the parent perseverance that makes the critical difference for students who underachieve. Heacox

(1991) saw the parent as an academic coach who can have a profound effect on the student's learning. The environment the parent creates in the home can promote positive self-esteem and achievement. Through awareness and perseverance parents play a critical role in ameliorating underachievement

Gallagher (1991) has stated that underachievement can be ameliorated through effective intervention programs. For the purposes of this review of the literature, intervention models from over thirty sources were examined. I also spoke with classroom teachers about their successes and failures in finding interventions to use with bright students who would not achieve in school.

As the result of this examination of the literature, I chose six intervention models for discussion in this paper. They were selected because of their focus on the general intervention factors of counseling, programming, the teacher and the parents as discussed previously; and their selection was also based on the possibilities for amelioration in a variety of school environments. In addition, I kept in mind the comments of Baker (1998) that it is the individual, the school, and the family that contribute to the problem of underachievement, and that interventions need to be targeted at all three systems.

The Cupertino Study (1980) has operated successfully since 1968. It was created by Joanne Rand Whitmore, who was at that time a professor with the George Peabody College for Teachers. Her model was based on the school problems that contributed to underachievement in gifted students. Thus, it was student-centered with emphasis on motivation and mental health issues. It calls for special pull-out classrooms and specially trained teachers to work with identified underachievers. Therefore, students are removed from the stressful and pressured environment of the general education classroom. In these classrooms student strengths are identified, taught to and celebrated.

Whitmore explained that the classroom environment is that of a family, not a factory. The idea is to remove students from the stressful and pressured environment of the general education classroom. Counseling is not a component of this program. Intrinsic strategies that incorporate the students' self-concept as learners is tied to their desire to achieve. From the viewpoint of the writer, this positive, encouraging, learner-centered classroom is at the heart of reversing underachievement. In this model, student strengths are identified, taught to and celebrated, as are student interest and passions. Therefore, Maker (1997) has lauded the Cupertino Project as a strategy to build positive attitudes about school in underachieving students which the general education classroom cannot accomplish.

The UAG (Underachieving Gifted Program) was implemented for children who appear to have high academic potential but are not functioning successfully in school in general or in an identified ability area. It was created and implemented by Patricia Supplee, an adjunct professor from Rutgers University as well as an elementary principal in the late 1980's.

It was designed as a pull-out program and organized to meet the needs of the individual achievement. The UAG format implemented specific curriculum to be used in a multi-age, cross-graded intervention. Program goals include improvement of self-esteem, improvement of attitudes, improvement of school-related behaviors, and targeting the specific academic weakness. From the view point of curriculum the affective was stressed before the cognitive skills. In this particular model, lecture as an instructional strategy was greatly deemphasized, while learning centers and flexible scheduling proved to be successful for students. Teachers were trained to provide friendly

classroom settings and were to develop skills in planning for individualization. The students who took part in UAG were followed as they progress through school with very positive results. Supplee (1990) relates many examples of the former UAG students making successful transitions to general education classrooms.

The North Vigo High School in Terre Haute, Indiana, developed an exemplary program for reversing underachievement. This program matched underachieving students with academic competition situations. Ballard (1993) called the approach "finding the right button". In this approach, academic competitions have an important place in the reversal of underachievement, becoming show-cases for students to reveal their achievement in non-school settings. Through participation in such competitions, students receive recognition for their academic talents and are provided incentives to achieve academically and succeed socially. Ballard had pointed out that programs such as Future Problem Solving, Odyssey of the Mind, Math Olympics, Science Fairs, Invent Iowa, and Quiz Bowl work to reach the underachiever. Such programs are low-cost and are able to reach the underachiever in the rural school environment. Ballard saw the academic competition as a way to challenge the underachieving gifted student.

The Trifocal Model developed by Dr. Sylvia Rimm (1986, 1995, 1997) at her Family Achievement Clinic in Wisconsin has made a special effort to involve the student, the parents, the community and the school in reversing underachievement. She believes that blame can become a major factor in the amelioration of underachievement and that valuable time and talents are wasted on blaming the family, the school, and the student. This model has proven effective to ameliorate underachievement over time in various pilot

studies and applications in varied school environments.

Rimm believes that parent/school communication is vital to amelioration of underachievement. Her model uses the six-step process of assessment, communication, expectations, identification, correction of deficiencies and modifications for the school and the home.

Assessment is Step One of the Trifocal Model. It involves cooperation between the parent and the school so that the underachieving student will receive the testing and evaluation necessary to provide a clear picture of the strengths and possible learning gaps. These assessments include parent interviews and tests of creativity and intelligence.

Step Two is the establishment of a communication link between the student and the parent. It is the most pivotal to the process to reversing underachievement. Rimm explained that communication is needed so that the adults at home and at school do not fall into the trap of continuing to reinforce the patterns associated with underachievement.

Step Three deals with expectations. Rimm has stated that is important to underachieving children that parents and teachers are able to say to them honestly that they believe in their ability to achieve. These expectations should be based on the concept that parents and teachers must know when to set high expectations and how high to set them.

Step Four is role modeling. Rimm stated that her research showed that providing a role model for an underachiever has proven to lessen the severity of underachievement. Role modeling is important because it is a critical way for parents and teachers to effect change for underachievers. The underachiever should be matched with an achieving adult so the student can see first hand what achievement can look like.

Step Five deals with closing the learning gaps for the student who is underachieving. Tutoring and basic skills building are part of this step. Tutoring that targets the gaps in an underachiever's basic skills can help to reverse underachieving behaviors because of the missing foundation of knowledge.

Step Six calls for modifications at home and at school. For example, rewards should be based on activities completed and motivation observed all in support of achievement.

Rimm (1997) stated that with the implementation of this model four out of five students who come to her achievement clinic in Wisconsin are able to reverse their patterns of underachievement. She estimates that the average reversal time for underachievement through completing these six steps in the Trifocal Model ranges from six months to a year, depending on the patience and perseverance of the student, the parents and the teacher(1995).

Baum (1994) has described the Prism Model in terms of analogy. She stated that just as a prism takes in nondescript light and transforms it into colors, so does a student-centered enrichment process unleash the hidden potential of the underachieving student. The Prism Model is a student-centered enrichment program which is patterned after the Renzulli Enrichment Triad Model. In Prism, students are able to pursue their chosen passion area using their learning style. The teacher plays an important role in the success of this program. He or she needs to be caring and able to facilitate underachieving behaviors. In essence this model developed students' individual gifts, talents, and interests and set up remediation for their individual weaknesses. Baum (1995) believes that underachievement can be eliminated through this enrichment model.

The Cognitive Enrichment Network Educational Model (Cognet) is a

program that focuses on intervention strategies at the preschool and early elementary level because of the belief that intervention at these stages of development are more likely to have an effect on life-long learning than programs that begin later (Greenberg, 1993). It is designed to meet the needs of identified young children who are at risk for underachievement during their first years of school.

The model is based on the mediated learning experience theory of Feuerstein. Mediated learning looks at the way children think and learn and tries to fill the learning gaps in their skill base. Adult role models are critical to the success of this model. Cognet is one of the twelve "Follow-Through" educational models funded to meet the needs of students who are at risk of school failure. It was organized as an instructional program especially designed to teach specific concepts/skills that can be integrated into the regular classroom. During a three-year study, Greenburg found that students and parents saw changes in rates of achievement.

Baker (1998) in her study of the risk factors leading to underachievement found that the individual, school, and family, all three, contribute to the problem of underachievement. Thus, it seems apparent that any intervention needs to be targeted at all three of these systems, since they are likely to provide opportunities for personal adjustment and academic support for underachieving children and adolescents. These groups need to seek out answers to the individual situation of each underachiever, and then select those interventions which seem to be the best fit for his or her individual needs. There is no one magic pill. By working together in the development of interventions unique to the individual, amelioration of underachievement can become possible.

In retrospect, each of the discussed intervention models tends to focus on the intervention denominators mentioned previously. The Cupertino Study emphasized counseling as the major intervention for ameliorating underachievement. The UAG also focused on the affective needs, but through the development of a specific curriculum. The Indiana Program, with its focus on competition and “finding the right button”, sought to raise student expectations. The Prism and Cognet models, along with the UAG, put special emphasis on curriculum and programming. Rimm’s Trifocal Model used a characteristics approach with attention to collaboration and communication among parents and teachers, and students as the vital factor for ameliorating underachievement.

Conclusions

An examination of the many definitions of underachievement have led me to the conclusion that the “syndrome” is not a disability. Rather, it is a learning weakness, a discrepancy related to performance behaviors that can be changed. A related conclusion is that, since underachievement is an individual problem, different rules/prescriptions must be applied to every situation.

By examining the different characteristics of underachievement as they appear in the reviewed literature, I have concluded that, in most cases, the discrepancy between performance and actual ability is caused either by or enhanced by a lack of self-esteem. It is also apparent from the literature that this lack of self-esteem is, in most cases, fueled by unique situations in the family, home, and school environments. These situations, in turn, become a major risk factor leading to underachievement. Therefore, it is important that

parents and teachers not only become aware of the development of lack of self-esteem in individual children/ students, but also become sensitive to the possible negative impact of parental/teacher expectations upon that self-esteem.

A third conclusion that I have reached from this review of the literature is the fact that underachievement in gifted children and adolescents can and must be ameliorated. Parents, teachers, and the students themselves may become frustrated because the learned behaviors of underachievement are so difficult to overcome. However, I am convinced that if a gifted achiever is treated as a person of value and if he or she receives caring support from the school, the parents, and the community, he or she can achieve success in school. In order to achieve in school, students need support. Young people need caring, principled adults who support them and guide them (Benson, 1995). I was surprised by the 70% figures of students who saw achievement as an asset in their lives as reported by the Search Institute. The Search Institute found that if students have the achievement assets in their lives, they tend to be successful in life and in school. My examination of the literature does not reveal, however, that there is a best intervention, that will in all cases ameliorate underachievement for gifted students. Rather it will take an understanding of the unique needs of the student along with a concerted, collaborative effort of all those involved in his or her educational program.

Finally, I have concluded that underachievement is a school related problem of learned behaviors that can cause a student to underachieve in school. As a long time educator, I have wondered why bright students often do not succeed in school. I have wondered why they did not want to play the "school game" --why they did not believe in themselves. I have wondered why

teachers have become frustrated by the double jeopardy of brightness and underachievement and why they many times have “given up” on a student. This review has provided a new understanding for me, both as a teacher and parent. I have achieved a new understanding of the necessity of the existence of a caring adult in the school environment. I have a new understanding from Colangelo and Davis (1991) that giftedness itself does not ensure educational or creative success or productivity. Identification for a gifted program does not guarantee achievement in all areas of a student’s life. I have a new understanding of the dangers of stereotyping and labeling that accompanies any diagnosis of underachievement (Delsile,1994) I have a stronger confirmation of the need for schools to restructure and to take responsibility for gifted underachievers so that they will have a chance to reach their highest potential.

Recommendations

Parents, teachers and students are frustrated because the learned behaviors and habits of underachievement are difficult to overcome. However, there is no single intervention that will reverse underachievement. It will take the combined efforts of the school, the student, and the parent working in a positive partnership to ameliorate underachievement in gifted children and adolescents. The following recommendations are based on personal experience and my synthesis of information from the examination of the literature for underachievement.

First of all, the adults who touch the life of the underachiever must take a proactive stance. Underachievement is a problem that will not solve itself, so

the parents, the teachers, and the school as a whole must be act assertively to bring out solutions. It is easier to put out sparks before having to deal with the flames of destruction. All stakeholders must be committed to what is the best for the student, not the system. The open door policy is critical to the amelioration of underachievement. The one size fits all approach will not work. Prodding and punishment will not work. The blanket and band-aid approaches to underachievement will not work. Teachers and parents, working together, need to research and identify the issues involved. They need to plan and implement together interventions for the specific individual approach needed to reverse underachievement. They must learn to be proactive and assertive, while using the common sense not to get caught up in the power struggles that these students are so well suited.

It is very important that opportunities be provided to build the parent knowledge base concerning this learning risk. Parent workshops and information sessions should be provided, along with such activities as study groups formed to study and make recommendations for program implementation through collaboration of the school district and the parents. They should learn strategies for recognizing and acting upon expectations that fit the child and the situation. They should be taught to expect success but allow for set-backs. They must recognize themselves as the first and best role models for positive learning behaviors and achievement.

Teachers, as well as administrators, also need to participate in inservice/training courses that deal with underachievement. They have the obligation to seek out information and support structures for students who underachieve. They should seek innovative ways to develop curricula which is a challenge and interest for all students. They must develop the talent to open

lines of communication with students and the parents. Teachers, especially, must learn to teach to the individual's strengths and provide coping skills for the weak areas. The teacher, after all, is on the front line of this school related problem. They must be prepared to deal with it.

Underachieving students must take ownership for their learning and achievement in school. They must learn to use planners, to spend time on homework, to learn to ask for help, and to be aware of their strengths and use them. Students should seek out information on time management. They should look to the lives of eminent people to see if there are similarities with their own circumstances. They should take steps to change personal habits and behaviors from those of the underachiever to those of the achiever. They must become responsible for monitoring the internal locus of control, for working on study skills and for working on positive peer relationships. Such opportunities for growth can happen only if school districts and parents in the home provide an educationally sound program that specifically addresses the building of these skills and attitudes.

The lines of communication between the school and the home are vital to ameliorate underachievement. In reality, such communications should reach into the entire learning community. It is important that the district and the community play an integral part in the modeling of positive values based on the goals of success and achievement for all students. For example, school districts should implement sharing plans with local mental health agencies to provide counseling for the underachiever. Most important, as school districts in Iowa work on school improvement plans, their efforts to reflect changes which will result in higher student achievement should include the needs of the underachieving children and adolescents. For example, the literature showed

that early detection is vital to amelioration of underachievement. Therefore, every school improvement plan should include a program designed to identify and work with possible underachievers, beginning at the primary level. In order to reverse underachievement, much change is needed. As Caine and Caine (1992) stated: "To change successfully, and to deal successfully with change, we need to begin by reframing the issues and the descriptions of the situation itself. Then we will be able to move forward" (p.2).

Finally, this literature review, along with the stated conclusions, also suggests some recommendations for further study on the syndrome of underachievement. For example, additional research is needed in the identification of behaviors that lead to underachievement at an earlier level. Further study of student and parent attitudes and perceptions regarding success in school also might be of value in determining the causes of underachievement. Another valuable research tool might be a long term survey of identified gifted underachievers designed to characterize the value of implemented interventions over time.

A Final Reflection

Brendan's report card arrived in the mail recently. Both of us were very apprehensive. To our surprise the grades we worried about were out of the "D" range. The report card listed all "B's" and "C's"--a marked improvement. The intervention we began during third quarter had been successful for Brendan.

Through his elementary counselor, he was able to receive individual tutoring through a Title IX funded program. As a result, he experienced increased success through a daily after school check of his organization of

assignments, papers, and goals he had set for completion of his assignments by a caring teacher who was positive and respectful. We were delighted.

However, I feel that I must also share the comment from Brendan's regular classroom teacher who made no attempt to intervene in any way with this young man, our underachieving gifted student. Her final grade card comment read: "Grades improved but only because he was forced to stay at school to complete work. Brendan is still not a self-motivated learner."

Through the kind intervention of the elementary counselor, the school was able to provide a successful intervention for Brendan, despite the expectations of his teacher. If a teacher, a parent, or a national expert so much as hints at the possibility that a particular student is underachieving, he or she is labeled. So much for education being a positive partnership involving school, parents and students. Once applied, the label is seldom revoked (Delisle, 1996).

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