Gifted Underachievement: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know

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My child has been identified as gifted!!!!

Why is my gifted child not making straights A’s???
National Association for Gifted Children’s Definition of Giftedness

“Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).”

(“Definition and Rationale”)
“Gifted students means those students in public elementary, middle, and secondary schools... who demonstrate high levels of accomplishment or who show the potential for higher levels of accomplishment when compared to others of the same age, experience, or environment. Their aptitudes and potential for accomplishment are so outstanding that they require special programs to meet their educational needs.” (“Instruction”)
Definition of Gifted Underachievement

“Underachievers are students who exhibit a severe discrepancy between expected achievement (as measured by standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments) and actual achievement (as measured by class grades and teacher evaluations).”

(Siegle & McCoach 378)
Qualifiers of Underachievement Classification

- The underachievement is not caused by a documented learning disability.
- The underachievement has continued for an extended length of time.
- “Selective consumers” choose not to achieve in one area because they wish to focus their efforts elsewhere (e.g., art or music)

(Siegle & McCoach 378-379)
What are the characteristics of underachieving?

(Boulianne, Image)
Does the child exhibit characteristics of gifted underachievers?

- Weak academic self-concept
  
  *(I am not smart.)*

- Limited self-efficacy
  
  *(I can’t do the work.)*

- Weak metacognitive skills
  
  *(I don’t know how to learn.)*

(Siegle & McCoach 379; Inman)
A large percentage of gifted youth achieve considerably below their potential, and many high school drop outs are gifted.

(Kim; Morisano & Shore 249; Seeley 4)
Characteristics continued…

- Limited self-regulatory skills
  (I can’t control my impulses. I can’t make myself focus and study.)

- Lack of intrinsic motivation
  (I only do work if someone makes me.)

- Weak academic work ethic
  (I only do work that interests me or is easy.)

(Chuckwu-Etu; Inman; Siegle & McCoach 379)
Characteristics continued...

- **Poor organizational skills**
  
  *(I can’t find my homework.)*

- **Low goal-valuation**
  
  *(I don’t think school teaches me anything important to my life. I have no goals for my future.)*

- **Poor attitude toward school**
  
  *(School is boring! I hate school!)*

  *(Inman; Morisano & Shore; Siegle & McCoach 379)*
Characteristics continued...

- **Unproductive escapism**
  
  *(I just like to daydream or play video games.)*

- **Limited perseverance**
  
  *(I have creative ideas but never finish projects.)*

- **Excessive perfectionism**
  
  *(My work wasn’t perfect so I threw it away!)*

(Inman; Morisano & Shore 254; Siegle & McCoach 379)
Characteristics continued...

- Low effort in extracurricular activities.
  
  (I don’t feel like practicing the piano. Playing ball is too much like work!)

(Morisano & Shore 250)
Are you still unsure if your child is an underachiever?

Click on the following link to try the “Underachievement Quiz for Parents and Teachers” posted by Sylvia B. Rimm, Phd., an educational assessor.

http://www.sylviarimm.com/uq.html
What factors might affect a child’s academic success?
Reflection Leads to Solutions

Parents and teachers need to question themselves, the child, and the school at large to determine what is causing the underachievement; then, together, steps can be taken to find a solution.
Factors to Consider: Learner Profile

- Interests
- Culture/Ethnicity
- Gender
- Socioeconomic Status
- Family/Home
- Friends/Peers
- Life Changes
- Risk-taking ability
- Self-esteem
- Physical or psychological issues
- Disrespect for conformity
- Extreme creativity

(Chuckwu-Etu; Morisano & Shore; Siegle & McCoach 380-381)
Learner Profile Factor: Interests

Can the child find a connection between what interests him or her and his academic assignments?

(Emerick; Worrell 393)
Learner Profile Factor: Culture

Does the child feel isolated due to limited peers at school who share his/her ethnical or cultural background? Is your child being bullied or stereotyped because of his or her ethnicity?

(Hebert 416; Oh & Callahan 404; Worrell 391)
Learner Profile Factor: Gender

Male underachievers are identified two to one over females.

- Is a female student so quiet that teachers have not noticed she is underachieving?
- Is a male student’s behavior attracting attention at school so teachers noticed?

(Kim: Morisano & Shore 251; Siegle & McCoach 380)
Learner Profile Factor: Socioeconomic Status

Does the child have needed supplies and access to technology so he or she can be successful at school?

(Morisano & Shore 251)
Learner Profile Factor: Family

- Does the home provide support of academic achievement and a non-stressful place where children can study?
- Do children receive fair, firm, and consistent guidance and discipline?

(Morisano & Shore 251; Rimm; Siegle & McCoach 380)
Learner Profile Factor: Friends & Peers

- Are the child’s friends high-achievers who promote and support academics success?

- Do the child’s friends have negative attitudes toward school and make poor grades?

(Seeley 5; Siegle & McCoach 381; Worrell 391)
No Surprise

- Underachievers report that peers who do not care about academic success are the number one influence hindering their achievement.
- Friends who are negative toward school exert pressure on gifted students to NOT make good grades.

(Inman; Siegle & McCoach 381; Worrell 391)
Has the child experienced an unsettling or disturbing change?

- Divorce
- Death
- Relocation
- Injury
- Remarriage of parent
- Older sibling leaving home

(Siegle & McCoach 378-379)
Learner Profile Factor: Risk-taking

Is the child willing to take a healthy risk or is he or she too afraid of failure to try?

(Emerick; Kim 237; Morisano & Shore 251)
Learner Profile Factor: Self-esteem

Does the child believe he/she can achieve or see himself/herself as hopeless?

(Morisano & Shore 251)
Learner Profile Factor: Physical or Psychological Issues

Is the child struggling with physical or psychological issues that make him or her feel isolated from peers?

(Morisano & Shore 251)
Learner Profile Factor: Anti-Conformity

Does the child actively show dislike of social conformity?

(Kim 234; Morisano & Shore 251)
Learner Profile Factor: Extreme Creativity

Does the child become so engrossed in creative endeavors that he or she loses awareness of life around him or her?

(Kim; Morisano & Shore 251)
Factors to Consider: Gifted Programming

- Subset Identification Issues
- Small Pond-Big Fish Effect
- Intellectual potential not nurtured
- Miss-matched programming
- Limited Services
- No/Minimal differentiation
- Teachers lack gifted education training

(Chuckwu-Etu; Siegle & McCoach 381-383)
Gifted Programming Factor: Subset Identification Issues

- Does the child feel part of the gifted learning community?
- Is the curriculum and instruction culturally sensitive and supportive?

(Oh & Callahan 408; Seeley 7)
“Culturally responsive teaching is a technique for improving the performance of underachieving ethnically and racially diverse students. In the United States these students are primarily of Asian, African, Native, and Latino American ancestry, live in poverty, and attend schools in urban and rural areas. This approach to teaching helps all students acquire more knowledge about cultural diversity, and uses the cultural heritages, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as instructional resources to improve their learning opportunities and outcomes. Thus, it teaches to and through cultural diversity.”

Gifted Programming Factor: Small Pond–Big Fish Effect

Did the child lose confidence initially when entering the gifted program because he or she moved from being top of the class to intellectually equal with gifted peers?

(Worrell 391)
Gifted Programming Factor: Intellectual Potential Not Nurtured

- If a child is underachieving at the middle or high school level, was his/her giftedness nurtured in elementary schools by programs and teachers with high expectations?

(“Definition and Rationale”; Hebert 416; Worrell 396)
Gifted Programming Factor: Miss-matched Services

- Does the curriculum match the strengths or talents for which the child was identified as gifted?
- Does the curriculum connect with the child’s interests?

(Worrell 393; Siegle & McCoach 382)
Gifted Programming Factor: Limited Services / Minimal Differentiation

- Does the gifted program provide curriculum that challenge the child?
- Is the child in regular classes the majority of the time with little differentiation of services?

(Scott 147; Seeley 4)
Domino Effect

“When the curricula is not challenging, students become disinterested. Disengagement can lead to an underachieving or disruptive student. Underachievement may lead to dismissal from the gifted program and classroom disruptions may lead to something even worse, dismissal from school” (Scott 147).
Studying is BORING.
A Fate Worse than No Internet: Boredom

- Elementary students already know 40-50% of grade-level curriculum before entering class.
- Gifted students spend 80% of their time in regular classrooms with no advanced curriculum.

(Siegle & McCoach 380)
Gifted Programming Factor: Gifted Education Training

Has the child’s teacher been provided with training in Gifted Education

(Plucker 427; Plucker et al.)
Other Possible Causes of Underachievement

- Fear of trying and failing / fear of competition
- Teachers or parents criticizing gifted program
- Procrastination due to time management issues or poor work ethic
- Viewing intellect as “fixed” and unrelated to effort
- Pessimistic attitude toward success: setting goals too low or high, making success unattainable
- Educational gaps due to frequent school transfers

(Inman; Morisano & Shore; Siegle & McCoach 382)
Underachievers’ Top Three Excuses

1. I do not believe I have the skills to succeed, so I am afraid to try.
2. The assignments teachers ask me to do have no importance.
3. Nothing ever works out for me so why bother.

(Siegle & McCoach 383)
Is there a cure for underachievement?

“Academic underachievement can be reversed as a result of modifications on the part of both the student and the school” (Emerick).
Interventions & Solutions

Although parents cannot control teacher behavior or school practices, determining if classroom or teacher dynamics are contributing to a student’s underachievement may lead to solutions; parents who seek to help their underachiever need to conference with teachers often and work as a team to help reverse negative trends.

(Chukwu-Eto; Siegle & McCoach 383)
Interventions & Solutions

Counseling combined with instructional strategies can sometimes reverse the underachievement trend. Student-centered counseling seems to work best.

(Chukwu-Eto; Siegle & McCoach 383)
Interventions & Solutions

- “Educational programs... specifically to address the academic and social needs of gifted students can be successful in reversing many underachievement behaviors” (Matthews & McBee 167).

- Mentors combined with “interest- and strength-based activities can be quite powerful” in reversing underachievement (Emerick; Siegle & McCoach 384).
Counseling Interventions

- Parents, teachers, and counselors need to work together to encourage underachieving students.
- Students' interests, strengths, and talents need to be determined through observation, interviews, or testing.
- Parents and teachers remaining positive that underachievers can reverse their trend is of key importance.

(Morisano & Shore; Emerick)
Instructional Interventions: Academic Level of Programming

Raising the bar, not lowering it, sometimes reverses poor academic performance!

- More challenging curriculum
- Teachers with high expectations
- Increased gifted programming

(Emerick)
Instructional Interventions: Gifted Programming/Service Options

- Compacting (Skipping material already mastered)
- Acceleration (e.g., single-subject, grade-skipping, dual-enrollment, Advanced Placement, early college entrance)
- Grouping with intellectual peers in specialized full- or part-time classes
- Smaller-sized classes

(Morisano & Shore; 251 Siegle & McCoach 383)
Instructional Interventions: Class Dynamics

Underachievers who became achievers said the classes that turned them around included the following elements:

- Fun
- Complexity
- Independent Study
- Compacting (skipping known material)

(Emerick)
Class Dynamics Continued

- Real World Applications
- No Busy Work
- Discussions
- Hands-on Activities
- Experiential Learning
- Variety
- Flexibility

(Emerick; Kim 238; Seeley 4)
Class Dynamics Continued

- Feedback with Revision Opportunities (non-traditional grading)
- Less Restrictive Environments
- Mobility

(Emerick; Kim 238; Seeley 4)
Instructional Interventions: Goals

Underachievers stated that setting personal goals related to achievement, possibly using a “cost-benefit analysis,” motivated them more than grades. Examples of goals follow:

- Entry into a field of study (e.g., art, engineering)
- Admittance to a specific university or college
- Improve self-image
- Increase time to devote to personal interests by improving grades and reducing parental hassling
- “To break the stereotype of the Black teenage male who can't make good grades. And I succeeded.”

(Chukwu-Etu; Emerick)
Instructional Interventions: Goals

“Goals affect performance through four mechanisms: (a) both cognitively and behaviorally directing attention and effort toward goal-relevant activities and away from goal-irrelevant activities; (b) energizing, with high goals leading to greater effort than low goals; (c) increasing persistence, with demanding goals prolonging effort; and (d) affecting action indirectly by leading to the ... discovery and utilization of task-relevant knowledge and strategies.”

(Morisano & Shore 252)
Instructional Interventions: Teacher Dynamics

- A teacher who promotes cultural competence (respect for all ethnicities, races, cultures, and languages) creates a community of learners where everyone is welcome (Seeley 7).

- Underachievers who reversed their negative trend claimed that a supportive teacher was the single most significant factor in their success (Emerick).
Instructional Interventions: Teacher Dynamics

- Kim (2008) notes that “A creative adult can help the highly creative student navigate the bridge between autonomy and conformity so that they can learn the interdependence skills necessary for full creative achievement.”

- One-on-one afterschool time with a teacher coupled with rewards for achievement other than grades reversed underachieving (Ritchotte).
Instructional Interventions: Teacher Behavior

- Caring about students
- Liking students
- Talking to students as equals
- Promoting balance between creativity, individualism, and conformity
- Respecting all students

(Emerick; Kim 238; Seeley 6)
Instructional Interventions: Teacher Behavior

- Facilitating, not dominating
- Knowing subject matter
- Showing enthusiasm about subject
- Using varied resources and techniques
- Being involved in learning process (Emerick)
Student Interventions

- Changing from negative to positive self-concept
- Taking responsibility for achievement and finding success personally satisfying instead of as a means of pleasing someone else with good grades

(Emrick)
Student Interventions

- Overcoming perfectionism
- Increasing self-confidence through series of incremental successes (inside and outside school)
- Learning to use reflection to understand previous motives that led to underachievement trend and seeing “the big picture”
  
  (Emerick)
Review of Successful Interventions

- Seek counseling for student
- Parents and teachers work together to improve student’s self-esteem and remain positive
- Elevate “general psychological well-being” of student by finding appropriate extracurricular interests; try to relate school to those interests
- Improve student’s work ethic and study skills

(Morisano & Shore 252; Seeley 5; Siegle & McCoach 383-384)
Review of Successful Interventions

- Pair student with mentor
- Raise student’s self-efficacy level
- Develop student’s metacognitive skills
- Employ acceleration or grouping in smaller classes for student if appropriate
- Help student set individualized academic goals: short-term and long-term
- Adjust instruction and classroom dynamics
- Teachers exhibit high expectations and caring

(Morisano & Shore 252; Seeley 5; Siegle & McCoach 383-384)
Works Cited


Note: All images come from Clip Art or Google.com Images unless otherwise noted.