

Chapter 3

Understanding Underachievement

When a child's academic performance is much lower than would have been predicted by achievement test scores, IQ, or past academic performance, teachers and parents often turn to the counselor for an explanation. Why are the grades so low? Why won't the student participate in class? Underachieving gifted students have been a source of much controversy for educational researchers and many practical difficulties for the counselor and classroom teacher.

Educational researchers are in conflict about whether underachievement actually exists. Anastasi (1976) contended that underachievement is not even a legitimate category of academic behavior; the label is often based on comparisons of intelligence tests to achievement tests, which is inappropriate. Anastasi sees most underachievement as simply test error: A statistical artifact of imperfect methods of measurement.

Other authors (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1952; Whitmore, 1980) are concerned that there are too many definitions of the underachieving gifted. Dowdall and Colangelo found three different categories of definitions in their review of the literature: the difference between two standardized measures; the difference between a standardized measure and performance on some nonstandardized measures; and the difference between two nonstandardized measures. Within these categories there were scores of definitions. They concluded that "the variability of definitions is of a magnitude that makes the concept of underachieving gifted almost meaningless" (p. 179).

Nevertheless, many educators, at least at the elementary and secondary levels of schooling, have continued to attempt to identify the underachieving gifted, to draw conclusions about their behavior, and to develop remedial interventions (Bricklin & Bricklin, 1967; Fine & Pitts, 1980; Rimm, 1988; Whitmore, 1980).

Common Issues for Underachievers

Despite the wide variability in definitions, commonalities do emerge among observations and measures of students who are not performing as expected. Dowdall and Colangelo (1982) found that across studies, the characteristics of gifted underachievers were much more similar to underachievers in general than to gifted students in general. In fact, they resemble gifted students only in their high scores on IQ tests, achievement tests, or earlier grades. Compared to achievers, gifted underachievers seem to be more socially immature (Hecht, 1975); have more emotional problems (Pringle, 1970); engage in more antisocial behavior (Bricklin & Bricklin, 1967); and have lower self-concepts (Colangelo & Pflieger, 1979; Whitmore, 1980).

Social Immaturity

Gifted underachievers may be less well adjusted socially than gifted students in general. Their social immaturity is expressed in many ways. They may have difficulty making friends and they may not be able to sustain friendships. Gifted underachievers may have difficulty cooperating in a group, participating too much or not participating enough. They may dominate the group, or be too unassertive. They may show off, or engage in other behaviors that block the group's progress. Gifted underachievers in elementary years may have problems with separating from their parents during school hours. They may be overly dependent on teachers, or behave inappropriately toward adults. In games and sports, underachieving gifted students may be poor sports, finding it difficult to play by the rules and accept loss and failure in competition.

Emotional Problems

Underachieving gifted children's emotional problems range from crying too easily to getting angry too easily. These children tend to be oversensitive or overly aggressive. On personality tests gifted underachievers show a wide variety of personalities but also some common emotional problems such as depression or anger. Personal problems may also be manifested as extreme lability, that is, changing from one mood to another very easily. The emotional problems of gifted underachievers tend to be long-term rather than situational.

Antisocial Behavior

One of the most common findings about gifted underachievers is their tendency toward antisocial characteristics and behavior. In fact, on most personality tests, gifted underachievers look similar to sociopathic individuals. Sociopathic people have poorly developed consciences; are impulsive in their behavior: act out their anger by being aggressive toward people or destroying things: and tend to use their intelligence to deceive and "con" others.

Gifted students who engage in antisocial behavior may be those who are caught cheating on tests or stealing school property. They may hurt other children or take or destroy other children's toys. As adolescents, antisocial underachieving gifted students may engage in illegal activities such as selling drugs, shoplifting, or creating computer "viruses." Nevertheless, gifted underachievers' personalities are not entirely sociopathic or antisocial. A recent study by Arcenaux (1990) shows that although underachieving gifted students do possess such antisocial personality characteristics as impulsivity, need for play, and a self-centered orientation, these characteristics are paradoxically combined with a need for understanding and knowledge. Although they engage in behaviors that are not socially approved of, gifted underachievers seem to have a longing to understand their own behavior and the world around them. In contrast to the unthinking and unfeeling sociopath, the gifted underachiever may have the need for profound thought and for expressing intense feelings.

Low Self-Concept

The majority of studies of gifted underachievers have also found that most students classified in this way have very low self-concepts. They are negative about themselves in many ways. They see themselves as unattractive, unlovable, and unintelligent. Despite high intelligence test scores or achievement test scores, many gifted underachievers are convinced of their own inability to succeed. Many feel that they do not deserve to succeed. Low self-esteem always has many causes. One of the major causes of gifted underachievers' low self-esteem, however, may be their persistently low grades. For gifted underachievers, negative academic feedback is a vicious cycle. Poor grades lead to low expectations of self, which lead to even lower performance. Many gifted underachievers do not see a way out of this vicious cycle.

It is likely that there is a "true" group of gifted underachievers, one that is not made up of people who simply represent measurement error. This chapter will examine the various kinds of underachievement, explore the causes of that behavior, and suggest ways in which counselors can redirect the academic behavior of this population.

Varieties of Underachievement

Probably the most disturbing pattern of underachieving behavior is that in which a student's classroom performance does not match that student's scores on IQ tests, achievement tests, or other aptitude tests. It is important to explore the possible meanings of these discrepancies and to describe behaviors associated with each of these types of underachievement.

Discrepancies Between IQ Score and Classroom Performance

Observed discrepancies between intelligence test scores and academic performance are perhaps the most common instances of underachievement. What are the possible explanations for this discrepancy? The following is a listing of some explanations for this form of underachievement.

Hypothesis 1: The Test Is Wrong

[In many cases, when a single high IQ score conflicts with all other measures, and when classroom behavior is consistently average or below

to have high scores on spatial-visual tests and to be only in the average range on verbal abilities.

One of the most common scenarios for this kind of underachievement is a situation in which a child scores 140 on the WISC-R on the performance scale and 110 on the verbal scale. The full scale score will then be well in the gifted range, obscuring the fact that the student has only average verbal abilities. It is for this reason that school psychologists who have worked closely with the gifted recommend that we go well beyond the full scale score in making decisions about student placement (Hollinger & Kosek, 1986). The regular classroom and even the gifted education classroom often have little to offer the child of extraordinary spatial-visual ability. Beyond geography, geometry, art, and technical classes such as mechanical drawing and shop, the regular curriculum is oriented mostly toward the verbally gifted child. It is common that this child's unusual abilities will not be noticed, understood, or manifested in a talent area until adolescence or young adulthood. Einstein and Edison probably are examples of spatial-visual geniuses whose abilities were not tapped by schoolwork.

Counselors need to be aware that parents and teachers may have unrealistic expectations of children with high IQ scores based on high spatialvisual abilities. Counselors also need to help the students themselves reach a better understanding of the specificity of their talents. Students with spatial-visual skills need to be guided into classes in which their talents can be expressed.

Hypothesis 3: The Student Has Decided To Camouflage His or Her Abilities

There are a wide variety of reasons why a student might wish to hide his or her intelligence. Intelligence tests such as the WISC-R and the Stanford-Binet are individually administered. Frequently the test administrator is warm, supportive, and engaging. A child who might otherwise be cautious about showing his or her abilities in a group situation might, with the appropriate test administrator, show skills that are normally hidden from the classroom teacher. Girls may be more likely to *camouflage their abilities than boys*, particularly girls who have been brought up in traditional feminine roles (Kerr, 1985). Girls are more likely to obscure their intelligence after the beginning of adolescence. Members of particular minority groups may also believe it necessary to hide ability in the classroom (Colangelo & LaFrenz, 1981). A child with a strong Black identity who feels frightened or alienated by White teachers may attempt to camouflage his or her abilities in order not to be perceived by peers as a teacher's pet. Native Americans may simply be embarrassed by the competitiveness of the classroom and not wish to humiliate others.

Counselors need to help the child who is hiding his or her abilities to find ways to "come out of hiding." Group counseling in all-female groups or groups of gifted children from the same minority group may be useful.

High Achievement Test Scores, Low Classroom Performance

Underachievement that involves high achievement test scores and poor classroom performance differs from underachievement associated with a high IQ and low classroom performance because achievement tests are tests of knowledge and are often closely tied to curriculum. IQ tests are more general measures of reasoning, memory, and general knowledge. Therefore, a child who scores high on achievement tests is likely to possess the precise knowledge that is linked to work in school. It is difficult to explain how a child who seems indifferent or unmotivated in class can possibly have gained the knowledge necessary to score high on achievement tests. Where did the knowledge come from? Why isn't it possible for the child to show what he or she knows in class'?

Hypothesis 1: The Tests Are Wrong

Again, it is simply possible, given measurement error, that in rare cases achievement test scores can simply be wrong. This is likely to be the case when the achievement test scores are not

extraordinarily high but merely above average. Occasionally, lucky guessing on a multiple-choice achievement test may give an unrealistic score. However, if high achievement test scores have been achieved more than once and there is a consistent pattern, this hypothesis is unlikely to be true.

Hypothesis 2: The *Child Is Learning at Home*

Apparently, there exists a group of students who are essentially "closet learners." These are students who seem highly motivated to read at home and to practice school-related skills such as solving math problems. Why these children learn at home but seem uninterested in academic work at school can be related to a wide variety of psychological or cultural factors. Some gifted students have difficulty with authoritarian classrooms or schools and seem to underachieve in the classroom deliberately. Gowan, one of the many guidance specialists whose clinical observations support the concept of the gifted underachiever, described a "kind of intellectual delinquent who withdraws from goals, activities, and active social participation" (1957, p. 101). Although little has been written about this kind of student at the elementary and secondary levels, the "Intellectual delinquent" appears often in the literature of college student development. Psychologists who work with college students have long recognized the existence of a group of students who seem uncommitted or unconnected (Katchadourian & Boll, 1985; Keniston, 1960). These students are troubling to college educators because of their apparent failure to succeed within the structure of the college environment despite their high aptitude. These students do not lack academic ability, although they may lack study skills. In many cases, the underachieving gifted student seems to be deliberately choosing to fail. This kind of underachievement represents one of the greatest challenges to the counselor.

It should also be noted that many students who earn high achievement test scores may be similar to those who achieve high IQ scores and do not perform in the classroom. That is, they may be avoiding competitiveness or attempting to avoid peer group disapproval.

Hypothesis 3: The *Student Is Bored*

Students who have learned the material being presented in class a year or more beforehand may be too bored to perform well in class. Gifted students who have been grouped all their lives in the regular classroom may have simply given up on the possibility of being challenged. They know the material on achievement tests and may be willing to show their knowledge on tests, but are too angry or depressed about the repetitiousness and dullness of classroom work to pretend interest. Some of these students may actually try very hard to attain high scores on achievement tests purely for the surprise value. They may enjoy puzzling teachers and counselors with their high scores. Whereas the "intellectual delinquents" mentioned in the second hypothesis are rebelling against authority, these underachievers are rebelling against boredom. Despite the fact that these students seem beyond the reach of counselors or teachers, their kind of underachievement may be the most easily cured. Extraordinary academic challenge seems to be the treatment of choice. Often these students are hungry for any teacher or class that will provide them with new knowledge, new skills, and the opportunity to work hard at learning.

High Grade Point Average, Low Classroom Performance

This kind of underachievement, which is based on a difference between a cumulative, unstandardized measure of ability and performance at a particular point in time, is often observed during transitional periods from elementary to junior high, from junior to senior high, or from senior high to college. A student who previously had an unblemished record of A's suddenly seems to be unable to do better than C work. Teachers are often particularly alarmed by students with this pattern because of their seemingly precipitous decline in abilities.

Hypothesis 1: *Standards Have Been Lower in Previous Schooling*

Gifted students who change schools or who are making transitions in school from one level to another may show this pattern if the expectations of the previous school were simply not as high as those of the present school. There is a certain momentum that gathers behind the student who receives excellent marks in the early grades. Teachers in each consecutive grade, having spoken with previous teachers, may assume that the child is bright and highly achieving and mark that child accordingly even when the abilities may not be as high as presumed. Only when the student encounters a teacher who does not have access to previous records or to former teachers do the grades decline.

It should also be no surprise that grades decline when a student moves from a regular classroom to a gifted classroom or changes from a regular school or a magnet school to a school for the gifted. Faced with much greater competition, many students will no longer be straight-A students. This is not a true case of underachievement, but simply a case of students performing at their true ability level in an environment of students with similar and greater abilities.

Hypothesis 2: Situational Factors Are Interfering With Academic Performance

Like with all children, gifted children's academic performance is affected by trouble at home. Family conflict or divorce, substance abuse in the home, spouse and child abuse, or illness or death of a family member are all possible causes of a decline in academic performance. Webb, Meckstroth, and Tolan (1982) observed that gifted children seem to be much more sensitive than average children to conflict and loss. Therefore, any of these home situations may cause drastic changes in the gifted child's behavior at school. Although many gifted children continue to do well in school despite crises in the home, for most of them school becomes just one more source of stress. Poor classroom performance may actually be a cry for help. The gifted student, aware of his or her reputation as an excellent scholar, may be counting on the counselor to notice the change in his or her grades, to comment upon them, and to offer help and support.

High Classroom Performance, Low Achievement Test or IQ Scores

Although sometimes labeled as underachievement, this is not technically underachieving behavior. Actual performance that is higher than that predicted by psychological measures is sometimes called overachievement. There are several reasons why students' actual academic performance may be better than what was predicted by IQ or achievement test scores.

Hypothesis 1: The Student Has Test Anxiety

There are students who, under individual or group testing conditions, become so anxious that they cannot perform up to their true ability levels. Students may be test-anxious because of overly high expectations of others, learning disabilities that interfere with performance on particular types of tests, or frightening past experiences with test taking. True test anxiety goes far beyond nervousness or heightened arousal before the test. Test-anxious individuals become physically ill, lose all capacity to remember information, and experience extreme symptoms of stress such as trembling, sweating, dryness of the mouth, and lack of concentration.

It is likely that test anxiety not only affects the performance of test anxious students on standardized intelligence or achievement tests but also on classroom tests. Therefore, the discrepancy between high classroom performance and low test scores should occur only among students who have been educated in schools or classrooms where little in-class testing is done.

Because past grades are the best predictors of future grades, when grades are high and test scores are low, it is probably best simply to ignore the test scores. However, in cases in which it is apparent that low achievement test scores will significantly interfere with a student's chances of entering a gifted program or a particular college, it may be necessary for counselors to help students alleviate test anxiety through relaxation training or desensitization procedures.

Hypothesis 2: The *Student Is Benefiting From a Reputation or Halo Effect*

Occasionally, when a student's grades are much better than his or her achievement test scores, the student is benefiting either from family reputation or personal reputation. It is a common complaint of younger brothers and sisters that teachers are constantly comparing them to their older siblings. (In many cases, however, these comparisons can be advantageous. When an older sibling or whole line of siblings has been highly achieving in school, teachers come to have extremely high expectations of any family member. Sometimes students are graded somewhat leniently and given the benefit of the doubt because it is simply assumed that being from the same family of high achievers, this student, too, is one of unusual ability. Only when the student goes to a larger school where his or her siblings or family may not be known or to a new school where the family is unknown will grades begin to match achievement test scores more closely.

A student may also have extraordinary social skills that allow him or her to build a reputation as a high achiever not in keeping with the student's actual accumulation of knowledge and skills in the classroom. A student who is personable, lively, and an active participant in class may be perceived as intelligent and knowledgeable even when his or her actual recall and understanding of curriculum materials are not better than average. Achievement tests will nearly always show a discrepancy between what the student seems to know and what the student actually knows. This kind of overachievement may be particularly frustrating to teachers and counselors whose liking for an interpersonally skilled student causes them to be unhappy with the results of achievement tests. When test scores prevent the student from access to a gifted program or to a chosen college, it is a particularly sore point with those teachers and counselors who support the student's abilities. In these cases, retesting is always a good policy; however, when tests consistently show that the student is average or less than average in his or her understanding of particular curriculum materials, it is probably not a good idea to expect that student to be able to succeed in more challenging work.

Interventions for Underachievement

It is apparent from the above discussion that there are many causes of underachievement and many cases in which classroom behavior does not match test results. It is important, then, to understand that there must be as many types of interventions as there are types of discrepancies. What follows are strategies ranging from the simplest to the most complex.

Retesting or Reinterpreting Tests

In several cases described above, discrepancies were the result of test error. When this hypothesis may be true, it is important that a student be retested, preferably with a parallel form of the same test. Also, when it is likely that the test has been misinterpreted, counselors should seek an expert opinion concerning complex results. It may be possible simply by consulting the test manual to determine how the test could be misinterpreted. Occasionally it may be necessary to call a school psychologist, clinical psychologist, or counseling psychologist with expertise in measurement in order to understand particularly puzzling results. It is important to remember that even most psychologists do not have training in interpreting the results of intelligence or achievement tests for gifted students. Therefore, the psychologist consulted should have some coursework and practice in gifted education.

Occasionally it is the policy of a school district to allow only a limited amount of testing and no retesting. In this case it will probably be necessary for counselors to suggest that parents seek private testing and interpretation from a psychologist. This can be expensive and time-consuming for the parents and the student, but the benefits may be great if the student can then be appropriately placed in the academic program that he or she needs.

Appropriate Academic Placement

Many problems related to underachievement and overachievement can be solved by appropriate academic placement. Frequently more elaborate interventions such as time management and study skills training as well as personal counseling are tried rather than the simpler solution of appropriate academic placement. This is because a gifted underachiever's behavior is so markedly similar to that of a student who is having trouble with work habits or whose personal problems are interfering with academic work that it is assumed that these interventions must be attempted. Nevertheless, a great many underachievers will promptly begin to achieve when they are placed in a more challenging environment. Bored, restless, and resentful, many gifted underachievers are simply turned off to classroom activities.

Robert Sawyer, Director of the Talent Identification Program at Duke University, observed that intellectual challenge was often the treatment of choice for students who had been identified by talent search procedures as highly gifted, but were not achieving in their home school. Often these underachieving gifted students were being forced to sit in classrooms where the level of instruction was 4 or 5 years behind their actual abilities. This is not to say that a student who has been inappropriately placed in the regular classroom may not also need counseling or help with study skills. Many years of boredom can create a wide variety of emotional and behavioral problems.

Various combinations of placement and counseling should probably be tried at different school levels. For example, a gifted child in early primary school who is showing signs of underachievement may benefit simply from being advanced in the appropriate academic areas. The child can be moved to a higher reading group or allowed to skip a grade. In later primary grades, it may become necessary to combine some helping interventions with appropriate placement. Joanne Whitmore's (1980) Underachieving Gifted program in the Cupertino Public Schools provided challenge while at the same time making available support groups and counseling for low self-esteem, depression, and school-related difficulties.

At the Guidance Laboratory for Gifted and Talented at the University of Nebraska, a successful technique was to radically accelerate junior high gifted underachievers into college courses. Junior high seems to be a critical time for highly gifted students in which, if given appropriate challenge, they are able to advance rapidly in their learning and development; however, if they lack challenge, they may become rebellious or withdrawn. Enrolling junior high students in upper-level high school courses or even college courses may give the underachieving gifted student a new start. For the underachieving gifted student in high school who seems to be increasingly cynical and bored, early admission to college may be the best option. Frequently, it is sufficient for students to graduate with a minimum number of credits or even to complete a high school graduation equivalency exam to move on to college. Although it seems paradoxical to accelerate a student who is doing poorly, adding challenge to the student's life may be more effective than any number of counseling interventions.

Counseling Interventions

Despite the success of appropriate placement as an intervention for underachieving gifted students, some students still will require short-term or long-term counseling in order to improve their academic performance. Sometimes these are the underachieving students who have personality disorders or behavior disorders above and beyond the realm of boredom and lack of challenge. Students who are underachieving because of depression, substance abuse, family difficulties, or other conflicts are likely to need more than appropriate placement. On the other hand, some underachieving students who need counseling are simply students who have been frustrated for so long by the lack of challenge in their education that they have become embittered and pessimistic about the possibility of ever loving learning again. Many of these students could be considered to be suffering from existential depression, characterized by alienation and a sense of meaninglessness. Attentive, short-term counseling interventions aimed at the development of purpose and meaning can be particularly effective with this latter group.

A counseling intervention designed to help underachieving high school and college students to discover a sense of meaning and purpose was developed at The University of Iowa's Counseling Laboratory for Talent Development. This workshop is a variation of the career counseling workshop presented in chapter 5 on counseling for multipotentiality.

The steps, as designed by Arcenau and Kerr (1989) for the Counseling Laboratory for Talent Development, are included in the chapter 3 Resources section at the end of the book. This intervention is currently being evaluated in terms of its effectiveness in helping students to set goals, improve academic performance, and increase their sense of identity and purpose.

Summary

Although gifted underachievers seem to have more in common with underachievers in general than with other gifted students, there are important differences. Underachieving gifted students may be socially immature, may experience more emotional problems, may engage in antisocial behavior, and may have low self-concepts. However, it is also likely that they have a deep need for understanding the world and themselves, a thirst for knowledge, and the capacity to change negative behaviors when intellectually challenged. The counselor should test the full range of hypotheses about underachieving behavior before choosing an intervention. Interventions include retesting, academic placement, and counseling. Existential counseling focusing on the discovery of meaning and purpose may be helpful.

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