



Causes and Consequences of Underachievement and Non Achievement

Shelagh A. Gallagher, Ph.D.
Engaged Education
sgallagher5@carolina.rr.com

Seminal Work:


- Giftedness, Conflict and Underachievement

Joanne Whitmore

Problems Studying Underachievement

WHAT IS IT????

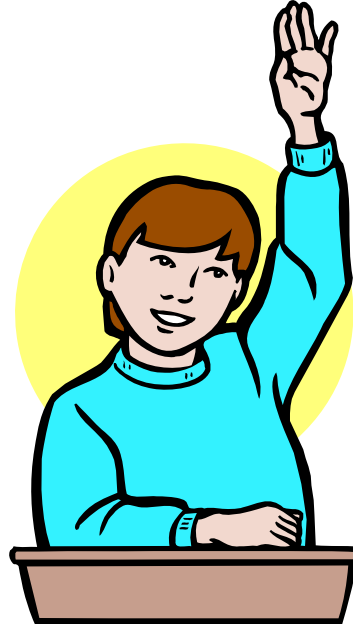
- Discrepancy score
- Discrepancy between actual and expected
- Life opportunity



Children want to achieve. Some do not because they cannot learn the way the material is usually taught. Others cannot sit still because of undetected or uncontrolled allergies. Some cannot hear well or process what they hear. And still others are rebellious due to emotional pain. **Underachievement is a symptom-a symptom with multiple causes.** The first step is to diagnose the problem!

Silverman

It's Not *JUST* a Gifted Phenomena



What does it look like?



Peterson & Colangelo (1996)

- **Attendance, tardiness, sustained underachievement**
- **“male students are more likely than female students to become extreme underachievers,”**
- **“most underachievers are chronic underachievers”**
- **“the phenomenon of under-achievement is global, with achievement level dropping in all academic work “**

What does it look like?

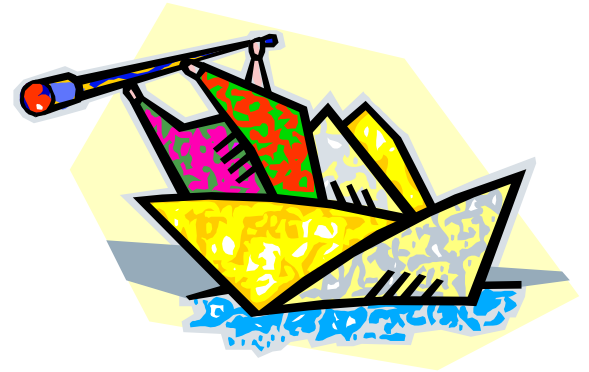


Peterson & Colangelo (1996)

- “For female underachievers, noncompliance may be an important contributor to underachievement “(*more often tardy and absent than male underachievers*)
- “Male and female students in each of the four achievement categories took a similar number of demanding and un-demanding electives. “

What does it look like?

- junior high is the critical time at the secondary level for patterns of *underachievement* to become established ...
- the transition to high school generally did not contribute to either decline or improvement



- although underachievers here were below the 75th percentile in class rank and extreme underachievers were below the 50th percentile, the mean score of underachievers was still at the 87th percentile on the ACT, using national norms. (Peterson & Colangelo)



Causes of Underachievement:

- Fear of failure
- Fear of success
- Fear of lack of acceptance by peer group
- Undetected learning disabilities
- Lack of basic skills and study habits
- Inappropriate educational activities
- Lack of opportunity in the society
- Too high or too low expectations of parents
- Lack of parental support for education



Other Causes of Underachievement:

- Fear of overshadowing parent
- Passive-aggression toward parent
- Low frustration tolerance
- Lack of impulse control
- Low risk-taking abilities
- Lack of competitiveness
- Guilt for being advanced intellectually
- Interests in activities other than school
- Cumulative deficits and belief in failure



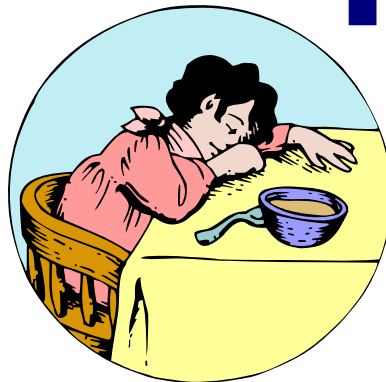
Sources of Underachievement

- Family (F)
- Environment (E)
- School (S)

- Individual (I) ??? Really? Or are we 'blaming the victim?'

Family

- Dysfunction
- Father-son relationship
- Family Disruption
- Parent Discord
- Tends to cause *episodic* underachievement
- Economic Status
- Language
- Ethnic Differences
- Motivation modeling
- Attitude toward school and jobs
- Tends to cause *chronic* underachievement



Environment

- Allergens
- Diet
- Light



School

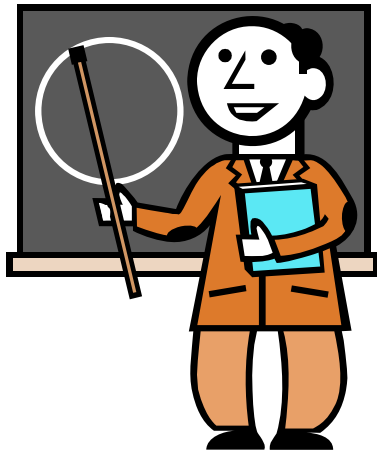
- Teachers
- Peers
- Instructional style



School

■ Teachers

- Training
- identification
- appreciation



■ Peers

- Kindred Spirit
- Pressure
- Acceptance



■ Instruction...



Learning Preferences and Underachievement

- Achievers vs Underachievers
- Learning Styles Inventory (Dunn and Dunn)
- Compared scores and looked for strong preferences within each group

Findings

- They are *more similar* than different
- **STRONG differences:**
 - Persistence
 - Structure
 - Tactile/kinesthetic learning preferences

What are the implications of kinesthetic preference?

- Tactile
- Intake of food or drink
- Sound
- Informal seating
- Dim lighting



The Spatial Learner: Upside-Down Brilliance

<http://www.gifteddevelopment.com/VSL/Rating%20Scale%20High%20IQ%20VSR.htm>

<http://www.gifteddevelopment.com/VSL/VSL%20Learning%20Char.htm>



The Underachieving Spatial Learner Gifted

Underachievers tend to have high spatial abilities and underdeveloped sequencing skills. This means that they will tend to have difficulty with much of the work in the elementary grades. These problems may be masked by obstinance, so that teachers and parents perceive these children as unwilling to do the work rather than unable. Silverman



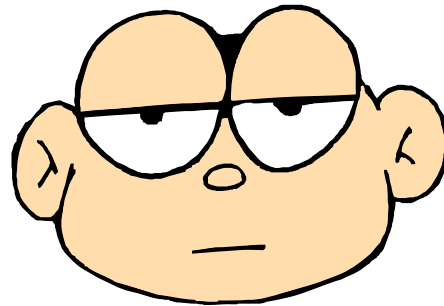
Critical Years: Middle School

Psychological

- Self-Esteem
- Negative/Debilitating Perfectionism
- Depression
- Dependent Learners
- LD

- ...and one more...

BOREDOM!!!



Underachievement
as a
sign of
SELF-DETERMINATION!

Research on Gifted and Boredom

- [Csikszentmihalyi](#), [Rathunde](#), [Whalen](#)

Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success
and Failure

What was boring?

- Copying, repetition, passive listening
- 'More of the same'
- Tutoring their classmates

The “Five C’s”

- Control:
- Choice:
- Challenge: The Unknown
- Complexity: Big Ideas, connections
- Caring Teacher: Mentor role

How to help Underachieving Gifted:



- Recognize their pain
- Try to get their symptoms diagnosed
- *NEVER* call them lazy!
- Do not blame them for their lack of achievement

Reversing Underachievement: Linda Emrick Gifted Child Quarterly



Reversing Underachievement

Results: Family/Home

- All students had long-standing out-of-school creative interests
- Parents supported their children's out-of-school interests
- Parents maintained a positive attitude towards them even in the face of academic failure. They did not see underachievement as a permanent pattern
- Parents remained calm, consistent and objective, and placed the responsibility for performance directly on their children
- (Emrick, 1992):

Reversing Underachievement : School

- Each student “**believed a specific teacher was the *single most influential factor* in the reversal of the underachievement pattern**”
- The teacher cared for and sincerely like the student as an individual
- The teacher was willing to communicate with the student as a peer

(Emrick, 1992):

Reversing Underachievement: School

- The teacher was enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the topic
- The teacher directly involved students in the learning process
- The teacher had high but realistic expectations for the student
- Classes provided opportunities for intellectual challenge, advanced studies, independent projects in their areas of interest, student discussion, relevant material

(Emrick, 1992):

Reversing Underachievement: School

- The students developed more self-confidence after a series of small successes
- The students began to perceive academic success in school as a source of personal satisfaction and a matter of personal responsibility
- The students believed they had gained in the ability to understand factors that may have contributed to the underachievement pattern
- The students exhibited creative ability, independence, willingness to take risks, perseverance, high intellectual ability, and an intense love for what they were doing.
- (Emrick, 1992):

Solutions to help Underachieving Gifted Students at Home:

- Ensure that child has a decent breakfast
- Eliminate corn or wheat from his diet
- Reduce the child's after-school responsibilities
- Place student in a counseling group with other gifted students
- Encourage family counseling
- Introduce him to role models of successful adults with background similar to his own
- Help the parents arrange a time and place for homework
- Make sure that the child gets more sleep
- Get the child a hearing aid or glasses



Solutions to help Underachieving Gifted Students at School:

- Get a tutor for gaps in basic skills
- Move the child to the front of the room
- Provide a support group of achieving peers
- Provide more challenging educational activities
- Move the child to another classroom
- Introduce him to role models of successful adults with background similar to his own
- Let child know that it is safe to succeed

Practical Applications for the Classroom:

- Find out what they know before you teach them
- Omit drill from their diets
- Be flexible in determining their program
- Design an individual educational plan
- Pace instruction to the rate of the learner
- Use discovery learning techniques
- Focus on abstract ideas
- Allow them to arrive at answers in their own way

Remember:



There is one factor that has been shown repeatedly to make a difference in the life of an underachieving child: *a caring, sensitive teacher who recognizes the child's true potential and is determined to help the child.* Children respond to those who believe in them.