

Underachievement -

How do we define, analyse, and address it in schools?

A view through the lens of the literature in gifted education

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Underachievement has been the focus of considerable attention in the educational context. This paper investigates the construct of underachievement through a review of the literature on this subject by writers in the field of gifted education. In engaging with literature on the underachievement of gifted and talented students, the reader could be excused for thinking that the problem is of a medical nature, with the dominant discourse being that of diagnosis and treatment, of remedy and cure, of syndromes, prevention and remediation, and even of epidemics. What is the nature of this underachievement 'epidemic'?

Defining Underachievement

Significant difficulty lies in identifying underachieving gifted and talented learners because of differing interpretations of exactly what it is that constitutes underachievement.

Many writers define underachievement as the discrepancy between an exceptional result on testing, and actual performance, which does not compare against the expectations for students of the same age. In other words, it can be described as the difference between potential and actual output (Clark, 2002; Davis & Rimm, 1998). Statistics indicate that half of gifted students do not reach levels consistent with their tested abilities (Rimm, 1994; cited in Colangelo & Davis, 1997). However, developing a definition in comparison with potential is fraught with difficulties, as there is no measure for *capacity* (Clark, 1992).

A second interpretation views the relationship between the talent and the expected contribution to society as the important point of comparison (Davis & Rimm, 1998). This discourse portrays underachieving gifted students as being “society’s greatest loss and greatest potential resource” (Davis & Rimm, 1998, p278). From this perspective, underachievement suggests adult disapproval, assessing what the student **hasn’t** accomplished. Delisle (1992, p116) maintains that the “name of the game is blame,” but questions just who set the initial frame of “rules.” Underachievement is perceived through the eyes of the observer who is influenced by predetermined expectations. In such instances, subjective judgments about the value of particular accomplishments are being made (Reis & McCoach, 2000). This view of achievement corresponds to the notion of a “society that assumes that economic advancement, social mobility and power are the criteria by which success is to be judged” (French, 1997, p13). If *underachievement* is defined in direct relationship to *achievement*, then underachievement is seen as a failure to meet these important criteria.

The difficulties of diagnosis of underachievement are compounded if the prized achievements in a different group do not align with these criteria. The construct of achievement (and, therefore, underachievement) differs from culture to culture, and may be quite different from that of the dominant culture (Reis & McCoach, 2000). There is concern in the literature regarding the under-representation of minority group students in gifted programmes. This issue raises doubts over the recognition of valued achievements, adequacy of identification procedures, along with low teacher expectations. This also may inhibit the provision of opportunities for such students, and reduce the effect of any future intervention programmes.

An alternative interpretation is to regard achievement in terms of personal capability, such as Sternberg’s ‘*Successful intelligence*’ theory (2000). Success here depends on capitalizing on individual strengths and addressing or compensating for weaknesses in order to adapt to, shape and select one’s environment. This definition presents the underachieving student with a different profile, relating specifically to the individual and

holding no wider societal obligation. The underachieving student is seen as not having the ability to transfer mastered skills and knowledge when they are required to do so (Cohen, 1990). From this perspective, the control over learning rests within the individual. Many would claim that failure to exercise control over personal learning is the key factor influencing underachievement (Clark, 1992; Clark, 2002; Davis & Rimm, 1998; Sturgess, 1999; Willings & Greenwood, 1990).

A final interpretation sees underachievement as relating more to individuals who fail to realize their goals, or to 'self-actualise' (Reis & McCoach, 2000). In this view, there is considerable recognition of the impact of emotional development interacting with the cognitive state, and subsequent underachievement. The importance of resilience in recovering from failure and of developing a positive attitude towards failure is emphasised (Cohen, 1990; Coil, 2000; Davis & Rimm, 1998). For gifted students, who are often perfectionists, this can be a particular concern (Silverman, 2000). Sturgess (1999) suggests that a significant difference between self-expectation and accomplishment can generate considerable conflict within the individual, causing negative behaviours designed to assert individual self-worth. If, however, students believe they are capable, and expect positive results for their efforts, then they will become achievers (Heacox, 1991).

The identification of exactly which students are at risk of underachieving, therefore, depends on which construct of achievement is adopted.

Analysing Underachievement

Although there is widespread debate about the complex and contradictory nature of underachievement (Reis & McCoach, 2000) there is general agreement on the key factors that may help identify those who are at risk of underachievement.

One key factor appears to be poor self-image and the loss of self-esteem (Clark, 1992; Davis & Rimm, 1998). Strong self-concept is developed through achievement. Students

need to see the relationship between process and outcome, effort and achievement, of setting and reaching a goal. It is through accepting and conquering challenges that self-confidence is developed (Rimm, 1986; cited in Davis & Rimm, 1998). This impacts on self-efficacy and self-esteem. For many gifted students, low self-image is related to the unrealistically high expectations of their parents and teachers, and at times the students themselves. Conversely, inadequate strategies and academic skills may accompany low aspirations and limited goal setting ability. These may have been developed in the early years of schooling when the learning was easy and presented little challenge. Minimal effort may have been made to develop the necessary study habits, and concentration. As time progresses, the child may develop a fear of failure, and avoidance behaviours factors which impact on their already “precarious self-esteem” (Davis & Rimm, 1998, p285).

While Piirto (1994; cited in French, 1997) suggests that underachievement may be a hallmark of dysfunction in the family of gifted students, this view has been contested by other writers. For example, Reis and McCoach (2000) question whether family discord and dysfunction is a result of, rather than a cause of, the underachievement pattern. However, parental reactions to the child, expectations and pressure are seen as key factors in the causal relationship (Clark, 2002).

Parents of gifted and talented children may show excessive commitment to their children, even to the extent that they may inadvertently reduce the children’s self-efficacy and competence (Clark, 2002). A cycle of dependence, particularly with the mother, may be established within the home as parents try to meet the child’s needs and demands. This may reach a point where the child is dominant and controlling, but dependent on others to complete tasks. Such children may identify their weaknesses but believe they do not need to be addressed, or believe they are unable to learn the new skills. This reduces self-efficacy and self-concept. Such a cycle of dependence may manifest itself in the classroom, and unconsciously be maintained by the teacher (Clark, 2002; Davis & Rimm, 1998).

Parents may unwittingly contribute to their child's underachievement. Hyman (1989, p11) suggests that very successful parents may not display the "early struggles, self-doubts, frustrations and sacrifices" that they have experienced on their journey to success, leaving the gifted child feeling that such struggles are unusual, or a sign of failure.

Attention addiction and excessive manipulation are seen as common behaviours among underachieving students whereby they elect to relinquish responsibility, rather than actively work towards achievement and accomplishment (Rimm 1986, cited in French, 1997). Disorganisation and procrastination are two common indicators of the underachieving gifted student (Rimm, 1994, cited in Colangelo & Davis, 1997).

Within the school environment, there are several factors that may contribute to patterns of underachievement. An unwelcoming school climate, inflexibility, and competitive classrooms, along with negative expectations and unrewarding curriculum are some of the factors identified in the literature (Davis & Rimm, 1998). Boring curricula, teacher rigidity and lack of tolerance for diversity, and even resentment towards bright students are acknowledged as being key contributors to underachievement in the classroom (Hyman, 1989).

Predictability, lack of challenge, variety, and stimulation and the setting of unrealistic goals and standards may all contribute to negative achievement attitudes within the classroom setting (Evans, 1985 cited in Clark, 1992). That such conditions may actually foster underachievement is supported in recent brain research which explains that richness of environment contributes to the development of interconnections of the neurons, which stimulate cognitive capacity and subsequent learning (Sousa, 1995). "Repetitive and unstimulating work may well be neurobiologically unnecessary, and even counter productive" (Geake, 1997, p29).

Schools may further undermine achievement by their failure to acknowledge and value high achievement, by failing to acknowledge the need for differentiated programmes for

gifted students, by perpetuating a culture that describes gifted programmes as elitist, or by undervaluing the work and talents of culturally diverse students.

Teacher bias against gifted students and their failure to meet the needs of these students may contribute to the anger that underlies much underachievement.

There may even be a serious conflict of values between the adult and the child, contributing to negative attitudes and subsequent underachievement (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Students may react to this situation by not doing their work, without understanding any negative personal consequences (Hyman, 1989).

It is important that parents' conception of intelligence and giftedness, and of achievement, match that held by the teacher (Sternberg, 2000). A possible mismatch between the child's motivational characteristics and the learning opportunities offered could negate attitudes and contribute to underachievement.

One common thread in the literature is that of underachievement being a set of behaviours that can be changed. As underachievement may be content or situation specific, it is possible to remodel the behaviours of students and change their achievement patterns (Clark, 2002; Delisle, 1992, 2002). The necessary focus is to "put the child back in charge of his or her own education" (Delisle, 1992, p124).

Once students have learned how to learn in changing circumstances, and how to transfer skills and knowledge, they will have greater command over their outcomes and achievement (Cohen, 1990). This will, in turn, impact on self-concept and self-esteem, and on attitudes to learning and achievement.

Addressing underachievement

Understanding individual students and their underachievement patterns is paramount to making any changes.

One way may be to analyse the students according to Delisle's (2002) framework which differentiates 'underachievers' from 'selective consumers.' The former require considerably more support as they are more dependent and withdrawing, and generally hold a poor academic self-image. In contrast, 'selective consumers' perceive themselves as academically capable, tend to be more independent and their performance is selected relative to the teacher, content or context.

Heacox (1991), who recognizes nine different categories of underachievers, provides an alternative framework that may be useful to help analyse underachievers. Many of the underachiever profiles parallel Delisle's (2002) selective consumers. The 'Rebel,' the 'Conformist,' the 'Bored Student,' the 'Complacent Learner' and the 'Single-sided Achiever' all maintain an internal locus of control in relationship to their learning, making choices about their achievement pattern. The 'Struggling Student' or the 'Victim' would be seen by Delisle as underachievers who feel powerless about their learning, and who need significant help to remedy their patterns of learning. Heacox (1991), however, describes two further underachiever profiles. The 'Stressed Student' who may become incapable of performing because of personal expectations of perfectionism, and the 'Distracted Student,' whose problems lay outside the schooling experience but may affect the ability to focus and function within the school environment.

These different types of underachievers need particular and individual strategies to enable better socialisation with peers, and to change behaviours and attitudes to enable academic success.

One effective strategy is the 'spotlight' approach, where time and effort are spent in clear identification of the specific problem, resulting in clearer direction for efficient

remediation (Delisle, 1992). Parents may need to make significant changes to their expectations and to their role modeling, as well as to their breaking the cycle of dependence or dominance with their child (Clark, 1992; Colangelo & Davis, 1997).

Assisting the learner to not only establish realistic goals, but also to develop strategies to enable them to achieve the goals, may also be beneficial. Sharing ideas and acknowledging achievement in a mutually respectful relationship may help to overcome patterns of underachievement, particularly if those patterns have been long standing.

Recognition of the factors that have caused low self-esteem are paramount, although acknowledgement that it may have taken years to develop such low-esteem, and that significant change may take time, is also crucial (Coil, 2000). A key factor here is attitude to failure, and the establishment of a culture in which failure is perceived as an opportunity to learn and develop ideas. It is important that parents and teachers celebrate, rather than feel threatened by, the child's advanced achievement.

The 'spotlight' should also be focused on the learners' control of their learning situations. There should not only be emphasis on strengths, but also development of ways in which students can correct or compensate for their weaknesses (Sternberg, 2000; Willings & Greenwood, 1990).

There also needs to be planned intervention to effect changes (Rimm, 1986 cited in Colangelo & Davis, 1997). This may involve a partnership between the school and the home to ensure consistency of messages, expectations, and strategies used, and to ensure that learners assume responsibility for their role in the remediation process (Coil, 2000). A strong partnership would also help break any repeating cycles that reinforce underachieving behaviour (Clark, 2002).

The school culture must also come under consideration. The environment should nurture positive self-concept, with a warm, intellectually stimulating, accepting openness which

values diversity (Clark, 1992). It needs to encourage an active partnership between school and home, with acknowledgement of the student's role in achieving success. The environment also should assist learners to develop realistic goals, highlight strengths, and address areas of weakness. As many gifted students are unaccepting of personal failure, the school culture should encourage an alternative framework for handling *failure*. Teachers need to encourage students to take risks, to engage in competition where winning is not the only or prized outcome, and to develop some resilience to cope with failure (Davis & Rimm, 1998; Willings & Greenwood, 1990).

Individual teachers also need to take responsibility for the development of a classroom culture that shows respect for learners and their needs, and flexibility in activities, programmes, and expectations. They should model and encourage risk taking, give ongoing support and encouragement, and differentiate their programmes to provide stimulating and challenging opportunities for their learners. Teachers should address their pedagogy and personal style to ensure that they are the catalysts who help underachievers to build confidence, and develop strategies that will change any negative patterns of achievement (Rimm, 1986 cited in Colangelo & Davis, 1997).

The nature of the school and classroom culture may determine attitude, effort, and belief in learning. Subsequent progression may then be made towards learners taking control over their own learning. This would enable the patterns of underachievement that are plaguing gifted students to be turned around. Establishing a positive culture of expectation in classes would assist teachers in stemming the tide of any 'epidemic.' The result would be learners with a strong internal locus of control, who are positive, confident and resilient in their learning. They would be goal-oriented learners who show pride in their accomplishments (Heacox, 1991).

Underachievement is a term that is relative to the definition of achievement – and there are diverse perspectives of this construct. To address the needs of their underachieving students, teachers need to understand the factors contributing to student achievement

patterns. They must also investigate their own concepts of achievement, and reflect on their own pedagogy.

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