
Our students are our future. The implications of any students not working to their potential are immense. As within any educational context, students' characteristics and needs must be considered on an individual basis.

Researchers have concluded that gifted underachievement is much deeper than boredom with school. Like many aspects of giftedness, the definition of, causes of, and solutions for the underachievement syndrome are complex.

Resources

- Schultz, B. (n.d.). Gifted underachievement: Oxymoron or educational enigma?. *Prufrock Press Inc.*
- Delisle, J. & Berger, S. (1990). Underachieving gifted students. *ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education.*
- Siegle, D. (2006). Parenting strategies to motivate underachieving gifted students. *Duke Gifted Letter, 6(4)*. Retrieved July 1, 2007 from <http://www.dukegiftedletter.com/articles/vol6no4-ee.html>.

Underachievement Syndrome:

When Gifted Students' Achievement Does Not Match Their Ability



Created by Megan H. Fader

Definition of Underachievement

Gifted underachievement may seem like an oxymoron, but research estimates that fifty percent of high ability students do not “achieve well”. Most educators categorize gifted underachievement as a discrepancy between potential or predicted achievement and actual achievement and/or as a failure to develop or use potential.

The typical difference between a low achiever and a gifted underachiever is the gifted student’s ability to score high on standardized achievement tests. Therefore, gifted underachievement relates more to everyday classroom performance.

Underachievement can vary among situations and subjects. Students who achieve in one context may not perform as well in another. Parents and teachers must intervene in order to assist all students in meeting their full potential.

Contributing Factors

Environmental Influences:

- Lessons and activities that are not stimulating or meaningful
- An anti-intellectual school atmosphere that focuses more on athletics and social status
- Inflexible course requirements
- Unfavorable peer influences

Personal/Family Influences:

- Unconscious belief that effort does not affect outcome
- Early failure to develop self-management skills
- Poor family relationships that include inconsistent expectations and pressures
- A suppressed perfectionism

Characteristics

Lewis Terman described several characteristics of gifted underachievers in a longitudinal study of 1,500 gifted students. His list included:

- Low levels of self-confidence
 - An inability to persevere
 - A lack of goals
 - Feelings of inferiority
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Support Strategies

- Label the behavior as underachieving, rather than the student as an underachiever.
 - Consistently provide a challenging curriculum.
 - Serve as a sounding board for students’ ideas and values.
 - Help students plan tasks and set realistic goals.
 - Encourage students to pursue excellence, rather than perfection.
 - Support and promote students’ interests and passions through real-world experiences.
 - Remember that advanced intellectual ability does not necessarily mean advanced social and emotional skills.
 - Avoid creating over-competitive environments and comparing students to others.
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