



Underachievement in Gifted Students

By Lesley K Sword,
Director, Gifted & Creative Services Australia Pty Ltd
© 2003

Characteristics of underachieving gifted students include:

- lack of self-confidence
- fear of failure
- fear of success
- academic skill deficits
- inability to persevere
- lack of integration towards goals
- poor self-concept
- excessive need for attention
- avoidance of responsibility
- thoughts of worthlessness
- avoidance of competition
- negative thought patterns e.g. believe themselves unintelligent despite test results and/or feel unable to succeed despite their high intelligence.

The primary factor for chronic underachievement in gifted students appears to be a lack of recognition and support for intellectual potential during the early school years. When highly intelligent children are not challenged academically at an early age, they find the work too easy, become bored, develop poor work habits and often have negative feelings towards school. Underachievement is an appropriate response to what they perceive as unrewarding work and the same students who are not motivated at school often demonstrate high levels of intrinsic motivation in their extracurricular interest areas. In contrast when the curriculum content is relevant to the child's potential and ability and is challenging high levels of motivation naturally occur.

Early in their schooling years, because of their intelligence, gifted children are able to complete school work without discovering what the word "work" actually means. They frequently know virtually all the first grade material before they ever enter that grade. This situation continues throughout their schooling and they are legitimately and consistently bored. Unfortunately, they learn that school work is effortless and they do not learn the skills of learning. In fourth year or year eight or during tertiary years, whenever the curriculum becomes challenging for the first time, they find they have not learned to study or persevere.

They also cannot build firm self-confidence since they have not learned a real sense of effort. Children must learn early that there is a relationship between their effort and the outcome. That creates the sense of internal control that differentiates achievers from underachievers. It is from accepting and conquering challenge that one builds self-confidence. It is from actual achievement that one develops a strong self-concept.

Underachievers have been denied the opportunity to build confidence since they have not experienced the relationship between process and outcome, between effort and achievement. In addition as they advance through school, they do not learn "how to learn"; the skills other students develop over time through effort. They do not experience healthy competition with others; another important skill building process.

Underlying the poor study habits, weak skills, disorganisation and defences are feelings of absence of personal control over their educational success. Underachievers often don't really believe that they can achieve their goals even if they work harder even though they may readily acknowledge that their lack of effort is the cause of the problem.

They become trapped in the under achievement cycle and as this cycle continues they feel less and less capable. They want to do better but don't know how. They lack important learning skills and sometimes have knowledge gaps. Their fear of failure increases. Their sense of efficacy decreases. They feel helpless and hopeless as the gap between where they are and where they should be widens. Persistent low grades lead to low expectations of self which lead to even lower performance. Pressure to excel or achieve only results in behaviour designed, consciously or unconsciously, to protect a shaky self concept threatened by fear of failure.

The cycle continues downward in an inertia that perpetuates the problem. Under achievement feeds upon itself and grows until something or someone either deliberately or spontaneously intervenes to reverse the cycle.

For teachers and parents working to reverse under achievement, it is important to realise that there are no short term solutions. The most effective approach to helping students become more motivated to excel academically is first to gain an understanding of the motivational dynamics causing the underachievement and then, in partnership with the student, teachers and parents, make appropriate changes in the school program.

A long-term, planned and co-ordinated support program needs to be put in place for underachieving gifted students. It should focus on identifying their strengths and then programming for those strengths. The program should be based where possible on the students' needs and interests and contain rewarding tasks such as inquiry and creative self-expression.

Skill deficits and knowledge gaps should also be identified and assistance provided in these areas. Remedial strategies need to concentrate on their strength or talent areas thus allowing them to excel, while, at the same time, improving areas of learning deficiencies.

Underachieving gifted students should, where possible, be encouraged to solve their own problems and have support and assistance in the problem solving process. Attempts and effort should be encouraged not just successes. They should be encouraged to self-evaluate their work in conjunction with teacher evaluation.

To be successful it is important that the program actively involve the students and that they receive continuing support from their parents, teachers and school counsellor/welfare teacher. If possible a teacher who the student likes and trusts should co-ordinate the program. Programs to reverse under achievement will be more likely to succeed if parents and teachers work together pooling their knowledge to provide a more complete and accurate picture of students' motivational characteristics and educational needs, while identifying more alternatives to handling the situation and solving problem.

Parents should be an integral part of the program and work with students to help them with understanding school constraints, (the rationale for basic curriculum requirements and instructional design), respecting staff and finding ways of asking to have their needs met. In this way parents and teachers are working together to help students develop the self-discipline necessary for improved performance and through this a sense of self-control. Parents and teachers can also support students by maintaining confidence in their ability to develop self-discipline and self-control while providing structured opportunities for continued success and development of specific skills.

It is important that regular and "as needed" conferences between students, parents and the program co-ordinator be held. It is sometimes useful to employ the services of an outside consultant with knowledge and expertise in the area of gifted underachievement to provide advice and support to the educational team when necessary.

Copyright 2003, Lesley Sword.

Properly attributed, this material may be freely reproduced and disseminated.

