

Why do gifted learners underachieve and what does the research say? Bronwyn MacLeod. Gateways Education.

Introduction

One of the most intriguing, and often frustrating, puzzles for those who study individuals with great intellectual and creative promise is why some bright students never reach the level of success of which they seem so capable (Clinkenbeard, 2012). Underachievement of gifted learners has been a much debated topic among researchers for a number of decades (Reis & McCoach, 2000; Gross, 2004) with much of the argument centred on the actual model of giftedness being used in the discussion and the resulting beliefs as to how underachievement should be defined and identified (Delise, 2004; Gross, 2004).

Definitions

A number of definitions of underachievement related to gifted students have been proposed with most relating to differences between identified ability and actual performance. Hollingworth (1926, 1942) described gifted underachievers as asynchronous learners with large gaps between their strengths and weaknesses. Whitmore (1980) identified underachievers as students who have an exceptionally high capacity for academic achievement but who are not performing at a level commensurate with this capacity. Reis and McCoach (2000) defined underachievers as students who “exhibit a severe discrepancy between expected achievement (as measured by standardised achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments) and actual achievement (as measured by class grades and teacher evaluations)” (p.158). Gagné (2008) described the phenomena of underachievement as that when high intellectual abilities remain gifts and are not translated to talent. In addition to these definitions, Delise (2004) also proposed a difference between underachievers and selective consumers, which were defined by their personal qualities and motivational intentions.

Research has identified that some groups of gifted learners are more at risk of underachievement than others, in particular students of minority cultures and disadvantaged students, both male and female (Neihart, 2006). Ford (1996) and Neihart (2006) also found that female students are at greater risk for underachievement than males, when self confidence, need for peer or social acceptance and achievement conflict are present. Chaffey (2004) poses the problem of students are ‘invisible’ underachievers (Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003), also called “shadows in the mist” because they underperform both in the classroom and on commonly used evidence of potential for higher achievement. ‘Invisible’ gifted underachievers exist in all sections of society but are more likely to be found in culturally diverse and low SES populations and thus the use of dynamic assessment is recommended for these students.

Silverman (2013) also suggests that any of the following characteristics observed in gifted learners warrants further investigation of their social and emotional well-being, and their academic progression:

- has a negative self concept;
- distrusts others; has feelings of inferiority;
- tends to rationalise errors;
- blames others for failure; avoids responsibility;
- presents as socially immature for their age;
- lacks self-discipline;
- does not focus on distant goals;
- cannot delay gratification;
- has few strategies for academic success;
- has difficulty being appropriately assertive;
- withdraws from stressful situations; desires immediate results.

In general, underachievers may also have one or more of the following characteristics:

- may perform at or above grade level on most outcomes.
- has little resilience to complexity or challenge, doesn’t have a good understanding of self as learner and doesn’t possess the skills to find solutions to learning problems (due to learning that was initially easy in their early years).
- is a conformist and usually does exactly what the teacher asks, often becoming the teacher’s organiser, class helper, message taker, in the primary years of schooling.
- maybe responsible and pose no behavioural issue for the teacher, therefore not recognised as ‘at risk’.
- travels well through school until academic challenge is introduced. This is may be in year 5, but typically may not be until year 9 or beyond school.

- collapses into a 'learning slump' when complexity or pace are increased. Patterns of responsive behaviour in this case may include:
 - acting out (aggression, disrespect for authority).
 - withdrawing into self – not communicating about school or the problem.
 - decrease in self-esteem.
 - a search for new friendship groups: a search for belonging in a group different than those chosen previously.
 - sudden or gradual disinterest in the subject causing the learning slump.

Betts and Neihart (1988, 2010) proposed six different categories of gifted learners as related to underachievement, suggesting differing behaviours, motivations and needs for each type. Suggested behaviours in these categories range from dependent, 'teacher pleasing', non-risking taking responses to tasks; to resentful, angry and challenging reactions to a lack of independence being offered in the tasks given or, to the inappropriate level of the task; to modifying, masking and denying their capacity to achieve and perform or even being confused about their capacity to complete the task; and finally to independent and self-directed learning behaviours which may or may not be given recognition in tightly controlled classroom environments.

Causes – what does the research say?

Research over the last two decades has pointed to a number of personality and environmental factors, which may be causal factors for the underachievement experienced by some gifted learners. Gagné (2008) posited in his developmental model of giftedness and talent, that the developmental process from gift to talent was impacted by the positive or negative influences of intrapersonal and environmental catalysts, and thus in some cases, the gifts do not translate to talent. In general, issues of low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), external locus of control (Weiner, 1985; Moore, 2006), dysfunctional perfectionism (Ablard & Parker, 1997; Davis & Rimm, 2004), forced choice dilemma (Gross, 1989), boredom (Kanevsky, 2011), metacognitive deficiencies and twice exceptionality (Betts & Neihart, 2010) have been shown to be contributing factors to underachievement. Increasing levels of dysfunctional perfectionism may also lead to a loss of an achievement-striving attitude; so that students begin to believe that the number of hours they study and their attention span in class have nothing to do with their performance, resulting in lowering efforts to achieve (Clinkenbeard, 2012).

Research –based strategies and interventions

Chronic underachievers who have underachieved for an extended period of time may begin to demonstrate mediocre or low achievement test scores as a result of disengaged classroom performance over multiple years. However, when given gifted programming options (such as self-selected independent study with a mentor), 82% of gifted underachieving students reversed their underachievement when they had the opportunities for this type of strength-based gifted programming (Baum, Hébert, & Renzulli, 1999).

Students who are invisible gifted underachievers must be identified quickly and be presented with academic rigour and the opportunity to learn how to learn as early as possible (Chaffey, 2005). These students need to be taught to jump increasingly higher hurdles in their learning and be given work that requires them to expend levels of effort similar to those who struggle with daily learning tasks. At times, an increase in complexity and pace, rather than more work at the same level, may be initially resisted by some chronic underachievers and invisible underachievers as anxiety will be present until the student realises that learning is about making mistakes just as much as it is about succeeding. Interventions require patience and sensitivity from teachers and parents, and the work being offered to the students must be pitched at the correct level of depth and complexity, at a fast enough pace to cause academic challenge. Finally the work offered must engage the student and so a focus on their area of interest is essential.

Conclusion

Silverman, (2013) offers the following concluding point when considering the issue of the underachievement experienced by gifted learners:

'For gifted students, achieving an A is not the goal. The real purpose of education is to learn new information. Students who achieve A's based on what they have already learned are gaining daily practice in underachievement. All students have the right to struggle. Struggling is essential to growth. It means that the student is stretching to attain new power in learning. And gifted students actually enjoy struggling to master new material—if they haven't been so pruned into grade-getters that they are afraid of a challenge. Girls, in particular, are at risk for shunning challenges in favor of performing perfectly what they already know.'

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