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Gifted Underachievement and its Dynamic Etiology

Stephanie L. Perry

Abstract: Gifted underachievement, an issue that affects 15-40% of the gifted population, occurs when a gifted child does not perform to the level of his or her accelerated abilities. This phenomenon develops through a blend of personal and environmental influences, including individual, family, and school factors. Furthermore, underachievement can occur when gifted students are not assessed or identified as gifted, and are therefore not provided with appropriate interventions. Counselors must discern which unique factors contribute to each gifted students' achievement level, and how to control these elements so that students may develop the confidence to reach their potential.

Underachievement is a prevalent phenomenon among our nation's population of gifted students, and may develop due to a variety of individual and environmental factors. Although the treatment plans for gifted underachievers remains vague, professionals must educate themselves on the etiology of this condition in an effort to improve intervention strategies.

No universally accepted definition of giftedness exists, yet most of today's researchers believe in a multidisciplinary and holistic approach to describing gifted and talented students. For example, the Javits Gifted and Talented Education Act of 1988 describes gifted children as demonstrating high levels of accomplishment, or the potential for such accomplishment, compared to their peers. These accomplishments may be in intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership fields. They go on to say that giftedness is not dependent on culture or economic status, and that those who display giftedness require additional services reflecting their individual needs. Sternberg supplies another definition, which categorizes intelligence in three parts: analytic (does well on aptitude tests), synthetic (unconventional thinking), and practical (problem-solving) (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2006). He believes gifted students may be exceptionally intelligent in one or more of these areas, compared to peers. Similarly, Gagné proposes that individuals who are gifted may display their giftedness in one of many subcategories of talents, such as social ability,

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musical improvisation, or mechanical skills, and Ramos-Ford and Gardner believe in the concept of multiple intelligences (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2006).

During early research on gifted students, many believed that one's ability was due to genes alone. Today, however, most researchers believe that an individual's potential to perform is not only due to the genes they were given, but is also affected by the situations they face. These researchers lean toward an integrative explanation of giftedness, and recognize the dynamic relationship between one's genes and environment. If a child is born with a tremendous intellectual capacity, and is recognized for this capacity, his innate abilities will actually influence his environment, and vice versa (Hardman et al., 2006). For example, an inherently bright student may recognize that he is bright, may be identified by their peers and teachers as bright, and may then seek out or be placed in situations that will foster that innate intellectual ability. His environment, in return, influences the expression of his innate ability by providing him with opportunities to develop and demonstrate his intellect. Being placed in an accelerated and challenging classroom, for example, will allow him to exercise his intellect and succeed at academically challenging tasks. Just as his genes helped to shape his environment, his environment contributed to the expression of his genes.

However, not every gifted or talented student is recognized for his exceptional level of ability; the variety of definitions leads to difficulty in assessing and identifying those who actually are gifted. Because there can be no single test that measures giftedness, identifying individuals primarily begins with a nomination made by a teacher who believes a student may display tendencies associated with giftedness. Those nominated individuals are then assessed through a variety of measures. However, nominations are very biased and subjective, and individuals who in fact are gifted may be overlooked for several reasons (Hardman et al., 2006; Peterson, 2006). Such reasons include having behavioral problems, coming from a diverse cultural background or low socio-economic status, or displaying a disability (Peterson, 2006). Students with these characteristics are underrepresented in the gifted population, while those children who pay attention in school and behave in socially appropriate ways tend to be more often nominated for assessment.

The variety of definitions and subjective nominations also affect prevalence rates for giftedness, as well as the services available for gifted students. Because no standardized identification process exists, the

national rate ranges from as little as 3% to as much as 25% of the population (Hardman et al., 2006). The low end of this range demonstrates how many gifted people may not be assessed or identified as gifted. If a child is overlooked, their gifted abilities may not be fostered by teachers and counselors, which may lead to diminished achievement levels. Similarly, there is no federally mandated requirement for gifted students to receive special educational services, since no federal definition of giftedness exists (Hardman et al., 2006). These children may not be receiving an education appropriate to their needs, further hindering their ability to capitalize on their talents.

Gifted underachievement, an issue that affects 15%-40% of the gifted population, occurs when a gifted child does not perform to the level of his or her accelerated abilities (Baker, Bridger, & Evans, 1998; Peterson, 2006). Many underachieving students may be mislabeled as lazy or ungifted, which could explain the broad range of identified underachievers. Like definitions of giftedness, definitions of gifted underachievement remain diverse. Yet several researchers agree that the underlying feature of underachievement is a child's failure to academically perform at the level appropriate to his or her measured potential (Baker et al., 1998; Hoover-Schultz, 2005; Peterson, 2006). Different types of underachievers exist, however, and may be characterized by the underachiever's performance style, personality characteristics, or factors influencing their achievement (Peterson, 2006).

Underachievement tends to emerge among gifted students during their late elementary and early middle school years. During these years, children are beginning to make more social comparisons. They become more aware of peer norms, and have a heightened desire to conform to them. If a gifted student wants to become more like their peers, they may perform to the academic level of their friends, rather than to the higher level of which they are capable. Additionally, new demands are placed on students as they progress through school, such as increased time management or study skills. These skills may be underdeveloped among gifted students because they may be used to experiencing relatively easy success in school. They may struggle when called to manage their time or study habits, rather than the actual academic material, resulting in possible underachievement (Baker et al., 1998).

No one single factor causes underachievement in gifted students; rather, it develops through a variety of personal and environmental influences (Hoover-Schultz, 2005). These influences may include

individual factors (such as poor organizational skills or low motivation), family influences (such as unclear expectations from parents), or school factors (such as poor student-teacher relationships) (Baker et al., 1998). The etiology of gifted underachievement remains diverse, so interventions targeting this phenomenon must be sensitive to the specific factors influencing underachievement in each unique student. By understanding what may be a catalyst for gifted underachievement, educational and counseling professionals may be more prepared to tailor treatment plans to better suit each student's needs.

Individual factors prove to be a very present influence on underachievement among gifted students, as can be seen through the shared characteristics within this population. Gifted underachievers tend to have low self-confidence, lack the ability to persevere, have few or no goals, and experience feelings of inferiority (Hoover-Schultz, 2005). Some research suggests that they are also perfectionists and fear failure, as well as have a diminished locus of control (do not believe they have control over positive outcomes in their life) (Baker et al., 1998). These characteristics may have a paralyzing affect on gifted students. They do not persevere in the face of adversity because they either fear not living up to their own or others' expectations, or believe they do not have high abilities in the first place. Additionally, gifted underachievers tend to display temperaments characterized by aggression, hostility, rationalization, and judgmental thoughts (Baker et al., 1998). Such personality traits may contribute to negative attitudes toward school and academic performance.

Gifted students who lack motivation to excel are also at risk for underachievement. McCoach and Siegle (2003) found that poor motivation was strongly correlated with underachievement, and may be related to gifted underachievers' low goal valuation. Goals imposed by parents or teachers may conflict with the students' personal interests, which decreases students' motivation to attain these seemingly obligatory goals (Seeley, 2004). Furthermore, gifted underachievers tend to lack perseverance, so may not aim to perform well when obstacles arise (Hoover-Schultz, 2005). These findings suggest that gifted students who lack the ambition to academically perform to their ability risk low achievement in school. This absence of motivation may be due to the fact that some gifted underachievers do not believe achieving their goals is important. Therefore, these students believe they have no apparent reason to even try to perform to their high abilities. These attitudes result

in underachievement in school, which may also contribute to low performance levels in gifted students' post-secondary endeavors (Baslanti & McCoach, 2006).

Negative attitudes toward school and teachers may also predict underachievement among gifted students. Poor attitudes may stem from several factors, including poor study and organizational skills, frustration at unexpected academic failure, or problems with authority (Baker et al., 1998; McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Many gifted underachievers do not develop adequate study skills as they progress through school, since they had little need to organize study habits when earlier school material came easy. As concepts become more complex, gifted students may not know how to effectively study, which may result in poor academic performance. Not used to scholastic failure, these students may become overly-frustrated and develop negative attitudes toward school, further contributing to their low academic achievement (Baker et al., 1998). On the other hand, if material remains unchallenging, gifted students may become bored in school, and uninspired to excel. Also, some adolescent gifted underachievers lack respect for authority figures, including teachers, and may become openly hostile towards them (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Since they do not seek to work cooperatively with teachers, these gifted students may be at risk for performing to lower academic levels than those of which they are capable.

Many exceptional students are passed over for assessment and are not identified as gifted, even though they may display traits characteristics of gifted individuals, which increases their risk for underachievement. Ethnic-minorities, children from low income families, and children with disabilities remain some of the most commonly overlooked populations for gifted assessment. Most schools and governing bodies identify giftedness through intelligence scores, yet many IQ measures are ethnically biased towards the majority population. Students who are not European-American, and students whose primary language is not English, may not be able to perform well on intelligence tests, and are therefore not identified as gifted (Hoover-Schultz, 2005). Stereotyped thinking about low-income children's and ethnic minorities' abilities may also inspire school personnel to overlook these students for assessment. Consequently, they are often not measured for giftedness at all (Hoover-Schultz, 2005; Seeley, 2004). Students with disabilities are also overlooked for several reasons. Many people inaccurately associate physical disabilities with mental retardation, so children with congenital

disabilities are often not believed to have gifted abilities. Furthermore, children with learning disabilities may seem lazy or slow, yet may be capable of achievements greater than those they are demonstrating (Seeley, 2004). When these gifted students are overlooked, their unique needs are ignored, their abilities cannot be fostered, and they become unable to perform to their exceptional abilities.

In addition to factors within the individual, gifted underachievement may also be influenced by factors within the family environment, such as parenting techniques and family structure. Parents of gifted underachievers tend to be more inconsistent in their parenting strategies, more restrictive and punishment-oriented, and demonstrate less positive affect than parents of achieving students (Abelman, 2007). These habits create an environment characterized by unclear expectations and emotional distance between the child and the parents. Additionally, parents may lack the necessary skills or means to adequately support their gifted child's needs (Baker et al., 1998). Some parents lack the time to tend to their child's unique abilities, the knowledge of where to seek services for gifted children, the money to afford additional services, or the understanding of how to encourage their child's gifted talents. Consequently, that child's abilities remain under-utilized, which makes them more likely underachieve.

Disorganized family structures also characterize gifted underachievers' environment. In such families, behavioral guidelines remain unclear and children receive mixed messages from parents (Baker et al., 1998). Parents may disagree with each other on academic expectations for the child, or may model achievement behavior that is inconsistent from the guidelines they preach. For example, they may tell their child that they must perform exceptionally well in school, yet may not aspire to reach high standards in their own endeavors. Such mixed messages hinder gifted children's abilities, for they create an environment that makes exploration and clear communication difficult. In these family structures, children are not encouraged to take risks and explore their abilities. This, in turn, depletes their confidence to succeed at the high level of which they are capable (Baker et al., 1998).

The school environment also contributes to the development of underachievement among gifted students. Factors such as the school structure, teachers, and peer-relationships may inadvertently hinder a child's ability to perform at his or her expected ability.

Elements built into the school structure may create an inappropriate learning environment for some gifted students. Within large schools, it becomes easy for school personnel to forget children with unique needs (Seeley, 2004). Gifted students' education becomes impersonal and they are treated like their average-ability peers, even though they require different educational support than other students. Their abilities are not fostered, and they perform to levels below their ability. Additionally, many schools instill inflexible curricular requirements, which may be inappropriate for gifted students. For example, children are grouped in grades according to age rather than ability, and few opportunities to accelerate education (i.e., grade skipping, taking additional classes) are utilized (Baker et al., 1998). Assignments designed to challenge average-ability students become busy work for gifted children. They are left with few outlets to demonstrate or explore their higher abilities (Seeley, 2004). When a school fails to adjust their curriculum to meet gifted children's needs, these students become bored with class material, and they remain academically unchallenged. Boredom leads to lower participation in class and apathy towards achievement, resulting in high levels of underachievement among the gifted population.

Teachers' behaviors, expectations, and relationships with students also contribute to underachievement among gifted children. In some instances, teachers may fail to recognize gifted abilities and talents in a particular child for a variety of reasons. For example, a gifted child may act out because they remain unchallenged and become bored in class. The teacher, therefore, may only see the problem behavior, rather than the student's need for additional academic attention. (Baker et al., 1998; Seeley, 2004). When a student's giftedness remains unnoticed, they are not likely to receive an education appropriate to their high abilities. Some teachers may also hold low expectations of particular types of students, especially those with behavior problems. Gifted students often become behavioral challenges for schools due to their boredom in the classroom (Seeley, 2004). Consequently, teachers may not recognize exceptional abilities in students who are acting out: they attend more to the behavioral disruption, rather than the underlying factors contributing to their behavior (namely, their gifted abilities). As stated earlier, when giftedness is not acknowledged, it remains unlikely that a student's gifted abilities will be fostered.

On the other end of the spectrum, some teachers may have unreasonably high expectations of identified gifted students (Baker et al.,

1998). They may give in to stereotyped thoughts about gifted students, and believe that they are capable of incredibly exceptional achievements. In reality, these expected abilities may exceed a particular gifted student's actual potential. When teachers and other individuals hold gifted students to unreasonably high performance standards, detrimental consequences can arise. Students may withdraw from class or academic work, feel excessive amounts of pressure, fear failing other's expectations, or may feel otherwise paralyzed to perform. Furthermore, teachers may not acknowledge the good work that gifted students do produce, thereby not reinforcing their high level of performance (Baker et al., 1998). Because they are not recognized for the exceptional abilities they possess, and are set up to fall short of others' expectations, these students remain at a greater risk for underachievement.

Peers remain a significant force in gifted students' academic lives, especially after the late elementary years. As children move through middle school and high school, they may begin to value friendship over their academic achievements. Students' desire for peer conformity also increases. Therefore, gifted students may desire to become more like their same-aged classmates of average ability (Baker et al., 1998). They may subsequently perform to levels comparable to their friends, rather than their own. Schools may also inadvertently support alienating cliques that reinforce peer-acceptance and peer-rejection (Baker et al., 1998). For example, schools often support the honor roll system, and recognize individuals who academically excel. This remains a wonderful tool if honor roll students are seen in a positive light by the rest of the student body. However, gifted students who place more value on peer-acceptance may "dumb-down" their abilities if being on the honor roll is a socially unacceptable activity. In such scenarios, gifted students become underachievers by sacrificing their high abilities for the sake of peer approval.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL AND COUNSELING PROFESSIONALS

A plethora of factors related to gifted students' individual traits, family life, or school environment contribute to the possibility of their underachievement, yet underachievement is not inevitable, nor is it irreversible. By controlling some of these factors, and by creating an

appropriate learning environment, gifted students may become more likely to achieve to the level of which they are capable.

One of the more significant contributors to gifted underachievement is the difficulty of properly identifying gifted children. When a student is not assessed for or recognized as giftedness, despite their gifted abilities, they will not receive services to meet their unique needs, and their high abilities will not be fostered. To recruit students for assessment more fairly, school counselors and teachers must begin to actively identify students' gifted talents by focusing on students' strengths, rather than only recognizing their limitations. For example, gifted students with behavioral disorders may often be viewed as a disruption, rather than a child with unmet needs. If counselors and teachers look beyond the problem behaviors, explore the root of the actions, recognize the student's intellectual ability, and nominate that child for assessment, fewer gifted children will be overlooked. Another option would be to assess all students for giftedness upon entering a school. This would eliminate the bias of nominations and the risk of overlooking students for assessment. However, assessment techniques and testing must be improved so that the tests themselves remain unbiased. By creating and instilling more effective identification strategies, school personnel and families will be better able to recognize and effectively attend to gifted students.

Furthermore, schools can create a better educational environment to foster identified gifted students' learning. Research demonstrates that accelerating gifted students past the level of their same-aged peers leads to several academic, personal, and social benefits. Gifted students who graduate several years earlier than their peers tend to achieve higher academic goals, display more rewarding peer-relationships, believe more in their abilities, have greater passion for learning, and develop more self-confidence than gifted students who graduated with their same-aged peers (Gross, 2006). An environment where gifted students are not pressured to conform to average-ability, and where they are given opportunities to perform to higher standards, can serve as a protective factor against underachievement. If schools create learning environments that challenge gifted students, rather than restraining their academic potential, these students' intellect will become more stimulated, their self-esteem will be fostered, and their risk of underachievement will be reduced.

School counselors must advocate for gifted students to gain an accelerated educational experience, and must also educate teachers and

school personnel about gifted children's academic and social needs. By collaborating with teachers, principals, and other school personnel, counselors can work to ensure that high-ability students are being challenged in their classes, encouraged by their educators, and supported by their peers. School counselors can further enrich gifted students' school environment by developing programs and groups created for gifted students. Programs can focus on academic self-esteem, social pressures to conform, challenging intellectual tasks, or may simply serve as a place for gifted students to interact with each other. By advocating for and creating a safe and academically challenging environment, school counselors can help foster students' academic and social selves.

Effective intervention strategies for gifted underachievers remain largely unstudied, yet by understanding how underachievement develops, professionals may become more prepared to effectively work with this population. A blend of personal, family, and school factors dynamically combine to create a world where gifted students' abilities may either be promoted or discouraged. The challenge lies in discerning which unique factors contribute to each gifted students' achievement level, and how to control these elements so that student may develop the confidence to reach their full potential.

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