

## UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN GIFTED STUDENTS

Assist. Prof. Dr. Gülşah BATDAL KARADUMAN  
Istanbul University, Hasan Ali Yucel Educational Faculty  
Department of Primary Education, Istanbul, TURKEY

### ABSTRACT

One of the risks that the gifted students are confronted with is underachievement. This is a surprising fact for those with higher abilities. Underachievers can be found in every grade in school, from kindergarten to graduate school, in both sexes, across ethnic and socioeconomic groups, and in every occupation. What is underachievement? Underachievement is a discrepancy between ability and performance that persists over time. Many researches on the gifted education show the main reasons for the underachievement of the gifted are as follow: emotional problems of the gifted, their peer groups, lack of proper education satisfying their needs, learning disabilities of the gifted, and lack of differentiated and individualized curriculum. This is a literature review on the possible causes of underachievement and ways to eliminate underachievement of gifted children.

**Key Words:** Underachievement, gifted students, education for gifted students.

### INTRODUCTION

Underachievement can occur at any level of intellectual ability. Some underachievers are gifted, with superior intellectual ability and special talents. Others have mild to severe learning problems that are compounded by their lack of effort in the classroom (Rathvon, 1996).

Underachievers' true abilities may be masked by their underachievement. Consistently poor performance can seduce both parents and teachers into believing that the current level of performance is an accurate reflection of children's abilities and skill levels. Parents sometimes think that their children's problems will be outgrown. Teachers may assume that earlier observed abilities were not true abilities. The following strategies are effective in identifying individual underachievement and its extent (Rimm, Cornale, Manos, Behrend, 1993):

1. Underachievers may exhibit a decline in IQ or achievement test scores over time.
2. A significant difference between IQ scores and achievement test scores may indicate underachievement.
3. Underachievers often exhibit a discrepancy between their performance on individual and group IQ tests. Underachievers, particularly those who are attention dependent, may perform much better in an individual testing situation.
4. When there is a difference between achievement test scores or apparent academic skill levels and school grades, the child is definitely underachieving.
5. If the child is not making appropriate efforts, for example, in schoolwork completion and study, the child is underachieving. Thus if the process of learning is not taking place the child must be underachieving. Underachievers fail to meet the demands of the school situation.
6. Descriptions of the characteristics of underachievers are given in the first chapter of the book. They signal problems that do not go away automatically. Three to six months of these symptoms should alert parents or teachers into taking action.
7. AIM, GAIM and AIM-TO can be used to measure the extent and direction (dominant, dependent, or both) of underachievement. These instruments are measures of the achievement process and may be used for identification or individual evaluation.

Heacox, (1991) listed eight basic characteristics of successful students. If student does not show couple of this characteristic can be underachievement:

1. Achievers are goal-oriented
2. Achievers are positive thinkers
3. Achievers are confident
4. Achievers are resilient
5. Achievers have self-discipline
6. Achievers have pride
7. Achievers are proficient
8. Achievers are risk takers

Surprisingly, the underachieving student may have some of these characteristic; they are just not evident in school. Many individuals who are not academically successful have outside interest where their talents and abilities shine. There are plenty of so-called “poor student” who blossom when the final bell rings. They are computer whiz kids, accomplished musicians and dancers, active volunteers in their church or community organizations. Just because they don’t perform well in school doesn’t mean they can’t perform at all – a fact that’s important to remember and keep remembering.

#### **UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN GIFTED STUDENTS**

Seeing underachievement in gifted student is surprising and it is uncommon result (Neihart, Reis, Robinson ve Moon, 2002). One of the risks that gifted students face is underachievement. According to Richert (1991, as cited in Peters, Glader-Loidl, Supplee, 2000) there is reason to assume that “at least 50% of students identified through IQ have been designated as academic underachiever”.

Many gifted students continue to do well on achievement or reasoning tests, but, in their failure to turn in assignments or to attend or participate in class, demonstrate their disengagement from the educational process (Neihart, Reis, Robinson ve Moon, 2002).

The most basic definition of underachievement is a discrepancy between actual achievement and intelligence. In the famous study by Terman, it appeared that gifted individuals did not achieve as well as could be expected on the basis of their intelligence scores (Terman & Oden, 1947). Durr (1964, as cited in Peters, Glader-Loidl, Supplee, 2000) defined underachievement as a difference between IQ-score and actual school achievement, measured in grades or achievement tests. However the measurement of ability or the potential to achieve is problematic according to Raph, Goldberg & Passow (1966, as cited in Peters, Glader-Loidl, Supplee, 2000). For that reason, many attempts have been made to operationalize underachievement in ways that minimize the three problematic measurement issues: ability, performance and the discrepancy between them. Despite the difficulty, according to Tannenbaum (1991, as cited in Peters, Glader-Loidl, Supplee, 2000) one should try to define underachievement because there are few teachers who would deny the existence of students who exhibit this phenomenon.

#### **DETERMINATION OF GIFTED STUDENTS’ UNDERACHIEVEMENT**

What is known about underachievers? What are they like? The traits or characteristics of underachievers have been reported in many studies, although no one student would be expected to have all or even more than a few traits from this compilation. To further complicate our identification of these children, it has been noted that such children may be aggressive and act out their frustration by seeking attention negatively, or they may withdraw and quietly allow their talents to waste away (Whitmore, 1980, as cited in Clark, 2002).

Underachievement on a task may occur for a variety of reasons (White, Sanbonmatsu, Croyle, Smittipatana, 2002). Although the underachiever is often able to maintain adequate grades during education life because of his intellectual gifts, the signs of the latent underachievement syndrome become increasingly observable over time (Rathvon, 1996):

- Performs well when given one-to-one attention but is restless and unproductive when required to work independently
- Has trouble beginning and completing tasks
- Withdraws attention when parents or teachers give instructions
- Becomes distractible and distracting when not the center of attention
- Has difficulty relating positively to peers (may be revealed in complaints that others are “bothering” the child)
- Has difficulty relating positively to siblings
- Displays frequent temper outbursts or abrupt mood changes
- Makes incessant demands but is never satisfied with anything for very long
- Requires caretaking on some tasks beyond the age when it is appropriate
- Has difficulty organizing school materials and belongings at home

Criteria for identifying gifted underachievers should include a method for determining observable discrepancies between ability and achievement over a substantial period of time (Mandel&Marcus, 1995, as cited in Neihart, Reis, Robinson and Moon, 2002).

Thorndike (1963, in Tannenbaum, 1991: 65, as cited in Peters, Glader-Loidl, Supplee, 2000) warned of methodological problems in the determination of underachievers. He suggested the following questions as guidelines:

1. Have I an appropriate procedure for determining expected achievement?
  - a. Have I taken account of statistical regression?
  - b. Have I used the best team of predictors to establish expected achievement? Have I included aptitude? Initial achievement? Other appropriate factors?
2. Do I have a criterion measure of achievement that has the same meaning for all cases?
  - a. Have I procedures to check for criterion heterogeneity?
  - b. Have I a plan to deal with heterogeneity if it is found?
3. Am I aware of the effect of errors of measurement on my study
  - a. In reducing sensitivity?
  - b. In producing bias?

## CAUSES OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT

### Individual Factors

Many researchers listed basic individual factors of underachievement gifted students (Reis and McCoach, 2000):

#### *Personality Characteristics*

1. Low self-esteem, low self-concept, low self-efficacy.
2. Alienated or withdrawn; distrustful, or pessimistic.
3. Anxious, impulsive, inattentive, hyperactive, or distractible; may exhibit ADD or ADHD symptoms.
4. Aggressive, hostile, resentful, or touchy.
5. Depressed.
6. Passive-aggressive trait disturbance.
7. More socially than academically oriented. May be extroverted. May be easygoing, considerate, and/or unassuming.
8. Dependent, less resilient than high achievers.
9. Socially immature.

#### *Internal Mediators*

1. Fear of failure; gifted underachievers may avoid competition or challenging situations to protect their self image or their ability.
2. Fear of success.

3. Attribute successes or failures to outside forces; exhibit an external locus of control, attribute successes to luck and failures to lack of ability; externalize conflict and problems.
4. Negative attitude toward school.
5. Antisocial or rebellious.
6. Self-critical or perfectionistic; feeling guilty about not living up to the expectations of others.

#### *Differential Thinking Skills/Styles*

1. Perform less well on tasks that require detail oriented or convergent thinking skills than their achieving counterparts.
2. Score lower on sequential tasks such as repeating digits, repeating sentences, coding, computation, and spelling.
3. Lack insight and critical ability.

#### *Maladaptive Strategies*

1. Lack goal-directed behavior; fail to set realistic goals for themselves.
2. Poor coping skills; develop coping mechanisms that successfully reduce short-term stress, but inhibit long-term success.
3. Possess poor self-regulation strategies; low tolerance for frustration; lack perseverance; lack self-control.
4. Use Defense mechanisms.

#### *Positive Attributes*

1. Intense outside interests, commitment to self-selected work.
2. Creative.
3. Demonstrate honesty and integrity in rejecting unchallenging coursework.

### **Family Factors**

Another cause of delays in identifying and treating underachievers is that children's behavior at home and at school can be very different. It is not uncommon for children who are distractible or disruptive at school to behave appropriately (or at least manageably) at home most of time. When the teacher approaches the parents about the child's inattentiveness, lack of effort, or misbehavior, they may dismiss her concern because their perception of the child is so different. These differences in perception may be partly a result of parents' desire to avoid seeing the child's ineffective behaviors. Struggling to cope with their own responsibilities and worries, they have a hard time hearing that something else in their lives is not going right. Differences between parents' and teachers' views of the child may also stem from the different demands of the home and school environments for attention, responsibility, and productivity. Many of today's overburdened parents have precious little time and energy to monitor their child's behavior closely (Rathvon, 1996).

The relationship between children and their parents is of the utmost importance. Butler-Por (1993) described the situation of these children: "rejected children who are not receiving appropriate nurturing, reinforcement, and support are unable to understand what is happening to them and what is expected of them (Lee-Corbin and Evans, 1996, as cited in Peters, Glader-Loidl, Supplee, 2000). Also parent's high expectations from their children is affect to underachievement. It is difficult for parents.

At this point, parents may be asking, if monitoring doesn't work and rewards and punishment don't work, what are we supposed to do – nothing? The frustrated and discouraged parents of an underachiever are often so caught up in trying to make the child work that they can see only two treatment alternatives: increasing their control over him or giving up altogether. But there is another choice besides these two extremes. Instead of trying to change the child, parents must do something much more difficult. They must change themselves. That is, parents must change the ways in which they interact and communicate with the underachiever. It is these changes that will enable him to alter his distorted views of himself and the others in his environment and at last change the maladaptive behaviors that derive from those faulty perceptions (Rathvon, 1996).

### Environmental Factors

Many researchers listed basic environmental factors of underachievement gifted students (Neihart, Reis, Robinson and Moon, 2002):

- Chronically under challenging, slow-moving classroom experiences (Whitmore, 1986), or moving from a regular classroom to an appropriately challenging one (Krissman, 1989);
- Peer pressure to conform to “regular” norms, to “be like everyone else”, which may be particularly intense for students from underrepresented minorities (Diaz, 1998; Ford, 1992, 1996);
- Loneliness, isolation from classmates and the educational enterprise (Mandel& Marcus, 1988, 1995); and
- Family dynamics (family conflict drains energies; parents centering on the underachieving child masks other conflicts; (Green, Fine, & Tollefson, 1988); family has too-low, too-variable, or too-rigid expectations (Rimm, 1995; Rimm& Lowe, 1988).

### School Factors

School is the place where most underachievement behavior becomes visible. But as research indicates, it cannot be the only place where underachievement is overcome, since the etiological factors can also be found outside of the classroom. According to Heler (1992, as cited in Peters, Glader-Loidl, Supplee, 2000) the organization of teaching and the personality of the teacher were the two main factors that influenced the achievement of children in the classroom. Butter-Por (1993, as cited in Peters, Glader-Loidl, Supplee, 2000) added to this the attitude that the pupil has towards school; this may be displayed in less care for their schoolwork. Underachieving students tend to have peers with more negative school-attitudes (Ziv, 1977, as cited in Peters, Glader-Loidl, Supplee, 2000)

Inactivity and boredom not only hinders the teacher in observing capacities in students, it also induces underachievement (Freeman, 1993, as cited in Peters, Glader-Loidl, Supplee, 2000).

For factors contributed to underachievement of the students in the sample: emotional issues, social/behavioral issues, curricular issues and learning disabilities/ poor self-regulation concerns (Baum, Renzulli and Hébert, 1995).

### THINGS FOR PREVENTING UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN GIFTED STUDENTS

Before we have to prevent gifted students from underachievement we need to determine the main problem. We have to decide first if the student is really underachievement or he/she has some learning and mental problems and than this can help us to solve the problem (Rathvon, 1996):

1. In what subjects is the child making good progress and in what subjects does she need help?
2. How often is homework given and in what subjects?
3. For elementary and middle school students, what level is the child’s reading group compared with the rest of the class (remedial, average, or advanced), and what is the reading level of the textbook used in her group? Asking about reading levels is important because the child’s report card may not indicate the exact grade level at which she is working in favor of more general terms such as BGL (below grade level), R (remedial), or D (developmental), which can mean anything from six months to two or more years below the child’s actual grade placement. For example, the average child in the first month of third grade reads at a 3.1 level (third grade, first month). A third grader in the first month of school who is reading at a 2.2 level (second grade, second month) is nearly a year behind her grade peers.
4. Are the students grouped for mathematics, and if so, what level is the child working on and what is the grade level of her math textbook?
5. Are grades assigned by a uniform standard for all students in the school, by a standard for the class, or on an individual basis? Grading policies vary widely, especially in elementary schools, where teachers may give good grades for effort, regardless of the child’s actual achievement level. Thus a child who is working at an average or remedial instructional level may be awarded as if the teacher believes that she is doing

the best she can at that level. If parents don't ask about the child's relative standing in her class and grade, they have no way of knowing that the child's good grades do not reflect satisfactory achievement.

In addition to these general questions, parents should ask following ten questions that are designed specifically to help identify underachievers:

1. Does the child ask for help in ineffective ways, either by asking too often or by not asking for help when she needs it?
2. Does she have trouble completing work, especially when she has to do so on her own?
3. Does she work well when the teacher is near her and shut down when he moves away?
4. Does she give up easily on new or challenging tasks?
5. if she is inattentive, distractible, or impulsive in class, does such behavior increase when she is working independently or is confronted with a difficult tasks?
6. Does she interpret feedback about her academic work or behavior as criticism and have trouble using feedback to improve her performance?
7. Does she have trouble getting started on and completing long-term projects and written assignments?
8. Does she often forget her school materials, such as paper, pencils, and textbooks?
9. Does she often fail to hand in homework?
10. Does she appear capable of doing better work in class?

Yes answers to three or more of these ten questions indicate a mild underachievement problem. Positive responses to five questions indicate a moderate underachievement problem, whereas positive answers to more than five questions indicate that a severe underachievement pattern exists.

Identifying underachievement is also complicated because many conditions can contribute to a child's poor school performance. Asking themselves the following questions should help parents determine whether their child is an underachiever or is experiencing some other type of learning or emotional problem.

- Is the child's underachievement her major problem, or is she having trouble in other important areas of functioning as well?
- Is the child's underachievement general or specific?
- Has the onset of the child's poor academic performance been sudden or gradual?

How can educators help bright students who are underachieving in school? Underachievers are a very heterogeneous group. Like gifted students in general, they exhibit great variability and diversity in their behaviors, interests, and abilities. Because students underachieve for so many different reasons, no one intervention strategy can possibly reverse these behaviors in all underachieving gifted students. We need to individualize programs for underachieving gifted students at least as much as we individualize programs for achieving gifted students. The most successful programs to reverse underachievement behaviors will provide a menu of intervention options for different types of underachieving gifted students. These menus should include curricular modification and differentiation options such as curriculum compacting, counseling components, and self-regulation training activities (Reis, McCoach, 2000).

Educators must also realize that home, peer, and cultural environments may impact students' levels of achievement. As educators, we may or may not be able to change the external factors that contribute to the underachievement of certain gifted students. However, students who have reversed their underachievement behaviors have noted that having a teacher who supported and believed in them helped them overcome their underachievement. Therefore, in the absence of developing formal programs for underachievers, providing underachievers with support, attention, and positive feedback could help these students reverse their underachievement (Reis, McCoach, 2000).

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The concept of underachievement, though often discussed, is still vaguely defined in the the Professional literature. We need to find the resources which make them underachievement, and have to solve problem and

take cautions working with, family, teacher, and student cooperatively. Before we have to prevent gifted students from underachievement we need to determine the main problem (Batdal Karaduman, 2009). It will be suitable to take some cautions under the lights of researches up to now.

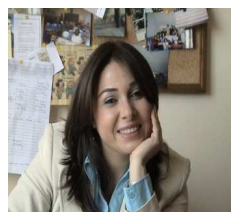
- It is needed to prepare and apply long lasting guidance program.
- It is needed a long lasting consultancy
- In this case if required it is needed to make individual or group therapy.
- We have to tell both student and his/her family what they need to do for achievement and help them to understand the reality.
- We have to enrich curriculum, courses and course materials for gifted students demands and learning.
- We need to find the resources which make them underachievement, and have to solve problem and take cautions working with student and family cooperatively. By this way gifted students can show high abilities and achievement. (Caglar, 2004). For teachers to abolish underachievement of gifted students:
- Definition (student certifications)
- Academically literature (Researching the related works)
- Communication between students and teachers. (Close communication with students, daily plans, sharing with other groups)
- Interview with teachers to solve the problem, systematical study suitable within the plan (Baum, Renzulli ve Hébert, 1995).

Rathvon (1996) classified some school strategies which need to be applied by school teachers for to solve underachievement problem for gifted students.

- School Strategy 1: Communicating constructively with the underachiever about his teachers.
- School Strategy 2: Communicating with the teacher about the underachiever.
- School Strategy 3: Refueling the underachiever in the classroom.
- School Strategy 4: Increasing constructive teacher-child interactions.
- School Strategy 5: Helping the underachiever listen effectively in class.
- School Strategy 6: Helping the underachiever ask effective questions.
- School Strategy 7: Helping the underachiever remedy skill deficits.
- School Strategy 8: Participating constructively in the underachiever's life at school.

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#### **BIODATA AND CONTACT ADDRESS OF AUTHOR**



Assist. Prof. Dr. Gülşah BATDAL KARADUMAN currently employed as an Assistant Professor at Istanbul University, Hasan Ali Yücel Faculty of Education, Department of Mathematics Education and Primary School Teacher Training Program. She is specifically interested in gifted education, creativity, creativity in mathematics, approaches and techniques of teaching, curriculum evaluation, individual differences in learning, the teaching of mathematics, learning of mathematics, creative drama, and spatial intelligence.

Assist. Prof. Dr. Gülşah BATDAL KARADUMAN  
Istanbul University,  
Istanbul University, Hasan Ali Yücel Faculty of Education  
Department of Primary Education, Istanbul, TURKEY  
Tel: 0 212 440 00 00  
E. Mail: [gulsah@istanbul.edu.tr](mailto:gulsah@istanbul.edu.tr)



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