



Nebraska Department of Education

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High Ability Learning

June 2021

Understanding Underachievement: A Complex Issue



As we know, gifted students are incredibly complex. As if being gifted was not enough, for some students we add an additional layer of complexity—underachievement. While the definition of “underachievement” is variable, the most commonly defined as the discrepancy between ability and achievement, meaning that students projected

achievement based on their ability or potential is much higher than their actual performance in school (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Sounds simple, right? WRONG! The factors that go into identifying and reversing underachievement are numerous. Not only do we have to consider school contexts, but home environments and extracurricular experiences, as well as linking behaviors to root causes.

It is important to note that underachieving CAN be reversed. Underachieving gifted students have unique characteristics that call for differing interventions. How we support students, teacher expectations, and familial attitudes all have a massive impact on student outcomes. This is true for all students, but underachievers are particularly susceptible to poor performance. Low self-esteem, avoidance behaviors, perfectionism, and deficient skills are just a few things that may plague our gifted students and cause a dip in achievement. Underachievement can be episodic or chronic, but intervening early and often will give the student the best chance to reverse their underachieving tendencies.



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Contributing Factors to Underachievement



Familial Causes:

A large portion of student achievement, high or low, is linked to behaviors from the home environment. Underachievement is a learned behavior, and a multitude of factors and patterns within the familial structure can contribute to student tendencies to underachieve. As educators, it is important to understand the home dynamics when working to

reverse underachievement behaviors. From a young age, students identify and model behaviors they see in adults in their life. As found in a study by Peterson (2001), student behaviors mostly mimicked a significant adult in their life, creating a circular pattern. There are three main variables for identification and modeling: nurturance, power, and similarity (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018; Reis & McCoach, 2000).

Nurturance happens when students identify with the parent that they perceive is highly nurturing. If that parent often protects the child from the other in terms of achievement and does not stress academic success, the child may receive the impression that achievement is not important (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018).

Power is when the student perceives the more powerful parent as underachieving. In this situation, the child is less likely to perform well in school. If the more powerful parent is sheltering the child and not promoting achievement, the student learns to take the path of least resistance (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018).

Similarity is when a student perceives themselves as more similar to one parent over another, and this can promote achievement or underachievement depending on the dynamics. In a study done by Rimm (2018), she found that more often than not, cross-gender identification is common in underachievers—especially males that identified with their mothers. Similarly, she found that no female underachievers from her study identified with their mothers.

One additional trap that parents could fall into is counteridentification with the child. While investing in a student can yield success, counteridentification goes beyond normal empathy and guidance (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018). Counteridentification may make parents vulnerable to manipulation.

Events

Nebraska Association for
Gifted Virtual Summer
Learning Series
July 21st & 22nd

[Register here](#)

NDE Day
July 28th
Kearney, NE



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Underachieving students may use manipulative tactics to avoid uncomfortable tasks. For example, if a parent sees their student struggling with homework, they may want to protect them from distress, causing them to do the homework for the child. The child then learns that they do not have to have required skills to complete a task, and they may carry this behavior to school and an unsuspecting teacher (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018).

Another counteridentification pattern is when the student is given too many choices and power is conveyed to the student in such a way that they manipulate their way out of tasks. For example, the student may manipulate parents or teachers to let them skip a task they are not comfortable with completing. This can lead to gaps in their basic skills (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018).

Parent-student dynamics are tricky, and they can promote academic success or underachievement. Communicating what is being seen at home and what is occurring in the classroom is crucial to identifying and reversing underachievement behavior.

School-Based Causes:

In addition to home dynamics, classroom and school climate can also contribute to underachievement. Students spend a majority of their day in our classrooms, so the environment can be a key player in student success. For HAL students, the classroom can be a source of frustration and stress. Because of their complex nature, underachievers are even more likely to experience anxiety and distress at school.



Classroom dynamics and teacher expectations are major factors when identifying factors for underachievement. Inflexibility and rigidity in the classroom is a recipe for underachievement for gifted students. If the pace and learning styles are not flexible, HAL kids are less likely to turn in quality work and more likely to just get it done as fast as possible so they can enjoy a more stimulating task such as reading (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018). Competitive environments are also troublesome for underachieving students. Because underachievers struggle with low self-esteem, being in a setting where they are being compared to peers causes lower self-evaluation (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018). The last major piece is teacher expectations. Teacher expectations have a large impact on student self-concept, so if the teacher has lower expectations based on past performances, the student will often live up to that measure.

While dynamics are important, the main player in underachievement is curriculum. Because HAL students are driven by challenge, they may find classroom curriculum boring and not worth their effort. This is a huge reason we see a gap between classroom performance and ability (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018). When students are challenged and motivated, that is the curricular sweet spot. This is not an easy task! When students are intrinsically motivated and see reward for their efforts, they are more likely to achieve. In addition to appropriate challenge, expectations that are too high or too low can cause poor self-efficacy. If the goal is too low, they do not see their accomplishment as valuable. If it is too high, they feel as though they will never achieve the unrealistic expectation they perceive has been set for them (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018).

Appropriate curriculum may not be enough to reverse underachieving behaviors, especially if they have been present for a long period of time. Underachieving students may exhibit avoidance behaviors in order to not show inadequacies (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018). They may try to hide a lack of basic skills that were not acquired or they are unable to appropriately value their skills and see themselves as being deficient.



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HAL Spotlight: Beth Maloney

The purpose of the HAL Spotlight is to allow you to connect and meet your counterparts across the state. Feel free to reach out to one another! Establishing a cohesive network is super important, and it reminds us that we all have one common goal—serving HAL students.

The educator spotlight for June is Dr. Beth Maloney from Omaha Public Schools. Dr. Maloney is the gifted and talented director for the largest district in Nebraska, and she brings an immense amount of passion to the table. She has been working tirelessly to promote equity and quality programming for HAL students in her district.



Teaching and Learning Consultant, Gifted and Talented Education
Curriculum and Instruction Support
Omaha Public Schools
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How long have you been in this position?

2 years (12 years total working in G/T)

What is your favorite part about working with High Ability Learners?

Advocating for the needs of a unique population of students who need our support.

What are some things you are excited about for the school year?

We can't wait to get back to seeing our students every day. We love our kids and have so many ideas for what we can teach them.

What is something you would like to tell other HAL people across the state? Is there any advice or anything you would like to say?

Keep pushing hard for our kids. There are so many advocates in our state doing amazing things for our students. People should know that there is a community of educators who are working toward the same goals that they can rely on when they need help.

What do you like to do in your free time?

Read great books and spend time with my kids and husband – I have a 4-year-old son and an almost 2-year-old daughter



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Identifying and Diagnosing Underachievement



Underachievers and underachievement are incredibly difficult to identify. For a lot of underachievers, their true potential may be unknown—especially if they have been under the radar for awhile. We measure underachievement by comparing test scores

with performance, but recent test scores may not give an accurate reading. Scores can be artificially lowered by lack of motivation, negative attitude toward testing, years of not learning, test anxiety, fear of being wrong, or creative problem solving on a standardized test (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018). Additionally, gifted underachievers may not be identified at all due to appearing average or below in school. Because referrals are the primary source of identification, teachers may not know the characteristics and patterns to look for. In several studies (Peterson, 2001; Rimm, 2018, Ries & McCoach, 2000), students may be identified as gifted in younger grades, but they may underachieve by 4th or 5th grade. If all the current teacher sees is poor classroom performance currently, they may not be aware that child is a high ability learner. This makes communication from one year to the next and record reviews crucially important (Rimm, Siegle, & Davis, 2018).

Underachieving gifted students have unique characteristics that we as educators can look for to identify and diagnose:

- Low self-esteem
- Poor self-efficacy
- Avoidance behaviors
- Rebellion
- Perfectionism
- Poor functioning in competition
- Poor study habits
- Poor peer interactions
- Deficient academic skills
- Poor discipline record at home and school

(Rimm, Siegles, & Davis, 2018)



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It is important to note that while these are some common patterns, gifted underachievers can present in a multitude of ways, including characteristics not on this list. Underachievement is a complicated subset of HAL students, and knowing general patterns of behavior may help identify and diagnose these students as early as possible.



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