**Underachieving Gifted*: Strategies To Foster Change In This Widespread Phenomenon***

**Crissy Brown**

[growinggiftedlearnersgroup@gmail.com](mailto:growinggiftedlearnersgroup@gmail.com)

growinggiftedlearners.com

***Definition of underachievement:***

* a discrepancy between potential (innate ability; gifts) and performance (achievement) (Heacox & Cash, 2014).
* Must NOT be the result of a diagnosed learning disability and must persist over a period of one school year.

***Themes in the definition of gifted underachievement:***

* Underachievement as a discrepancy between potential achievement and actual achievement.
* Underachievement as a discrepancy between predicted achievement and actual achievement.
* Underachievement as a failure to develop or use potential.

***Four Major Researchers on Underachievement:***

* Sylvia Rimm, *The Underachievement Syndrome: Causes and Cures*
* Barbara Clark, *Growing Up Gifted*
* Diane Heacox, *Up From Underachievement*
* James Delisle, *When Gifted Kids Don’t Have All the Answers*

***Rimm’s Underachievement “Syndrome”***

Identified 13 different forms of underachievement represented as fictional characters. Their underachievement has been “shaped” by their home, school climate, unrewarding curriculum, and personal flaws:

\*Manipulative Mary

\*Taunted Terrence

\* Depressed Donna

\*Passive Paul

\* Jock Jack

\* Academic Alice

\*Torn Tommy

\* Rebellious Rebecca

\*Dramatic Doug

\* Hyperactive Harry

\* Perfectionist Pearl

\*Adopted Annie

\* Creative Chris

All underachievers, whether dependent or dominant in their behavior exhibit:

* + Forgetfulness
  + Disorganization
  + Carelessness and superficiality on tasks
  + Non-academic interests
  + Manipulation of relations with parents and teachers
  + Loneliness and social withdrawal

***Clark’s Underachievement Characteristics:***

* There are 16 characteristics or behaviors that gifted underachievers exhibit to at least some degree, some of which are personal-related and some of which are school-related.
* Just knowing these behaviors are there is the first step to overcoming the responses (and choices) the underachiever makes.

**Personal**

* + Low self-concept, negative self-evaluation
  + Social immaturity, unpopular with peers
  + Choose companions who do not like school
  + Feelings of rejection, helplessness, feeling victimized
  + Low aspirations for future, career, less persistent and assertive
  + Externalization of conflicts, problems
  + Hostile toward adult authority figures

**School**

* + Lack of discipline in tasks, high distractibility
  + Don’t see connection between effort and achievement outcomes
  + Few strong hobbies or interests
  + Resistant to influence from teachers, parents
  + Lack of study skills,
  + Weak academic motivation
  + Leave schoolwork incomplete, nap during study times
  + Withdraw in classroom situations
  + Perform well on synthesis tasks but not on tasks requiring precise, analytic processing

***Heacox’s Up From Underachievement***

Gifted Underachiever

* + Poor academic self-concept, poor organization
  + External locus of control, attribute successes to luck and failures to lack of ability; externalize conflict and problems
  + Perfectionism, so unlikely to take risks
  + Independent --insist on doing only what they want to do
  + Discrepancy between oral and written work

***Delisle’s Differences in Types of Underachievement***

**Non-Producer/ Selective Consumer**

* + Mentally healthy
  + Can explain both problem and possible solutions
  + Independent and proactive
  + See teachers as adversaries and are contentious
  + Frequently satisfied with accomplishments
  + Sees self as academically able
  + Counseling needs are minimal
  + Requires little structure, needs breathing room
  + Performance varies relative to teacher and content
  + Can be dealt with within school resources
  + Change may occur overnight

**Underachiever**

* + Psychologically at risk
  + Does not understand causes or cures
  + Dependent and reactive
  + Respects or fears authority figures
  + Often perfectionistic, nothing is ever good enough
  + Poor academic self-esteem
  + Strong counseling program needed
  + Needs both structure and imposed limits
  + Performance uniformly weak
  + Requires family intervention
  + Change is long term

***Overexcitabilities: Dabrowski’s Theory***

Kazimierz Dabrowski- Polish psychologist who identified five personality characteristics or intensities, which he called "overexcitabilities" or "supersensitivities," which affect the way a student experiences the world.

***Emotional, Psychomotor, Sensual, Intellectual, and Imaginational***

**Overexcitabilities**

* Children do not grow out of these super sensitivities. A child with intense emotional feelings will experience the same depth of emotion as an adult.
* Higher than average response to stimuli
* Reactions that are over and above average in intensity, duration and frequency

**Emotional Overexcitability   
(one of the most common)**

* Acute sense of justice/injustice
* Anxiety, Depression
* Feeling inadequacy and inferiority
* Loneliness
* Empathy
* Strong memory for feelings

**Psychomotor Overexcitability**

* High level of energy
* Rapid speech
* Impulsive behavior
* Physical expression of emotions
* Many children with this type of oversensitivity often are misdiagnosed with ADHD

**Sensual Overexcitability**

* Heightened awareness of all five senses
* Sensitive to smells, tastes, or textures of foods
* Desire comfort in things
* Tactile sensitivity (bothered by feel of some materials on the skin, clothing tags)

**Intellectual Overexcitability**

* These children are thinking all the time and want answers to deep questions. Teachers may view them as questioning their authority or as disrespectful.
* Love of knowledge and learning
* Love of problem solving
* Avid reading
* Analytical thinking

**Imaginational Overexcitability**

* Their vivid imagination make them visualize the worse possible solutions.
* Vivid dreams
* Fear of the unknown
* Love of fantasy
* Daydreaming

***Finding the Right Approach***

* The child who chooses not to perform up to others’ expectations --the selective consumer --reminds us of the old adage:

“You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.”

* With just a little editorial license, this new proverb describes such a case:

“You can lead a child to knowledge, but you can’t make him think.”

* When approaching any problem, there are two general lines of attack:
* “Shotgun Approach”: where strategies are applied willy-nilly in hopes that something will hits its target
* “Spotlight Approach”: where a sharp, precise beam is focused on a specific situation or problem.
* In issues as complex as underachievement and selective consumerism, time and effort spent on locating the target will result ultimately in more effective and efficient treatment strategies. Delisle

**Rimm’s Trifocal Approach**

A trifocal approach can “cure” the syndrome

* + Child is monitored by home and school so that tasks are noted and completed, assignments turned in. System of behavior modification is used to re-shape the behaviors
  + Parents must carry out what school requires child to do, ensuring schedule, space, and monitoring of child’s work outside of school. Daily/weekly reports are provided for the school. Parents are counseled when discord or conflicts are present
  + School develops plan for child and parents to follow, notes when the plan has been followed and reinforces achieving behaviors when observed in the child

**Delisle’s Strategies for  
Improving Academic Performance**

* Supportive Strategies
  + Behaviors that affirm the worth of the child in the classroom and convey the promise of greater potential and success yet to be discovered and enjoyed
* Intrinsic Strategies
  + Behaviors that are designed to develop intrinsic achievement motivation through the child’s discovery of the rewards available as a result of efforts to learn, achieve, and contribute to the group
* Remedial Strategies
  + Behaviors that are used to improve the student’s academic performance in an area of learning difficulty which led to experience of failure and loss of motivation to engage in learning tasks

**Supportive Strategies**

**Non-Producer**

* + Eliminate work already mastered
  + Allow independent study on topics of personal interest
  + Nonauthoritarian atmosphere
  + Permit students to prove competence via multiple methods
  + Teach through problem solving rather than rote drill

**Underachiever**

* + Daily class meetings to discuss student’s concerns
  + Directive atmosphere to show who is in charge
  + Daily written contracts of work to be done
  + Free time scheduled each day to show import of relaxation, free choice
  + Use of concrete, predictable teaching methods

**Intrinsic Strategies**

**Non-Producer**

* + Student helps determine class rules
  + Assign specific responsibilities for classroom maintenance, management
  + Practice reflective listening, comment to clarify student statements
  + Student sets daily/weekly/monthly goals with teacher approval

**Underachiever**

* + Daily review of/reward for small successes
  + Allow students to evaluate work prior to teacher marking
  + Frequent, positive contact with family about child’s progress
  + Verbal praise for any self-initiating behaviors

**Remedial Strategies**

**Non-Producer**

* + Self-selected weekly goals for improvement
  + Private instruction in areas of weakness
  + Use of humor and personal example to approach academic weakness areas
  + Familiarize students with learning styles and personal implications for performance

**Underachiever**

* + Programmed instruction materials, students grade own papers upon completion
  + Peer tutoring of younger students in areas of strength
  + Small group instruction in common areas of weakness
  + Encourage students to work on projects not involving marks or external evaluation

***How Teachers Can Help***

* Help students develop strategies for recognizing stress reactions and coping with stress.
* Help students understand their own behaviors and how their behaviors impact others.
* The emotions of these students are real. Your molehills really are their mountains.
* Teach organization skills and help students stay organized.
* Hold students accountable for their work and grades
* Set realistic goals with students
* Have a routine to completing assignments
* Reward success/improvements
* Offer opportunities for younger gifted students to grapple

and struggle with tasks so they will know how to handle

difficult experiences later in school.

***How Parents Can Help***

* Begin with the most difficult or least enjoyable task
* Have fun without the guilt
* Keep a diary of your progress---list accomplishments and feel proud
* Remove distractions from work area
* Keep a list of projects you want to do if you use your time productively
* Help them alternate between tasks they enjoy and tasks they dislike
* Encourage them to keep a journal of the things that make them proud of themselves; help them be specific
* Follow through with organization strategies at home
* Allow more time than you think is needed
* Set flexible but realistic goals
* Break big projects into smaller ones
* Start something now, even if you don’t feel prepared
* Realize that nothing can be perfect
* Structure homework to limit distractions
* Encourage beating deadlines by providing extrinsic and intrinsic incentives

-- adapted from Adderholt & Goldberg, 1999

***Comparison Chart***

