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CHAPTER 1

The Underachiever Who Are We Talking About?

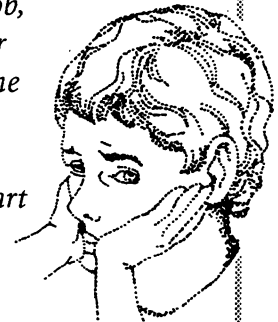


Brent is a year nine student who is failing English. His test scores are high but he never hands in any of the written compositions which are required weekly. After school, he “hangs out” at a Japanese restaurant where he has learned to speak, write and read Japanese in less than six months. Measured by a standardised intelligence test, his IQ is 140.

Joanna is twelve years old and in year six, but most people think she is fourteen or fifteen. She began maturing physically in year five, and her school achievement slipped from high to average. She is interested in going to the skating rink on weekends and in meeting boys. She says she doesn’t want the boys to know she is smart, because if they did, they wouldn’t think she was “cool”.



Leo is having problems at home. His parents went through a divorce two years ago and his dad often fails to make the child support payment. It seems to Leo that his mother is always unhappy. She has a job, but it isn’t enough to make ends meet. Leo is in year seven and finds school difficult. His teachers think he is a behaviour problem. He knows he should study, but he really doesn’t feel like it at school or when he gets home from school. He used to think he was smart enough to go to university someday, but he just doesn’t care about that anymore.



All three of the students described above are underachievers. They are representative of thousands of students who are not achieving academically or socially at school, yet have the potential to do so.

Underachievement is one of those popular “catch-all” terms that means something different to nearly everyone who hears it. In one sense, we are all underachievers. Studies have been done which show that all humans use only a small percentage of their total brain capacity. Additionally, most of us could pinpoint projects or

activities, tests or assignments where we could have put forth more effort than we actually did. Almost everyone can recall something in which they could have done a better job. However, the underachieving students we are focusing on in this book are more than this. These students have a significant gap between their ability and what they produce and achieve in the classroom.

Various researchers have quantified underachievement:

- *Underachievement can be defined as a discrepancy between the child's school performance and some index of his or her actual ability. Ability may be measured by test scores or even by observing the child at home or at school (Rimm).*
- *Underachieving students have a gap between achievement test scores and intelligence test scores or between academic grades and intelligence test scores (Gallagher).*
- *A child achieving significantly below the level statistically predicted by his/her IQ (Newman).*
- *One whose achievement score is lower than his/her ability score (Kowitz).*
- *When a child with a high IQ has low grades in school (Ziv).*

To my mind, underachievers are students who, in a significant way, are not working up to their potential. These students often see “You can do better” written boldly in red on homework and tests, and receive this message in many other ways, both verbally and non-verbally. However, for a variety of reasons they continue to do much less than they are capable of doing.



In studies comparing underachievers and high achievers, a significant difference in self-concept, school attitudes and out-of-school pursuits is shown between the two groups. While signs of underachievement often begin by year three or four, the upper primary or lower secondary year levels usually mark the highest point of consistent underachievement.