

Table of Contents

Part I: INTRODUCTION	1
The Story of Mike.....	3
How Can Someone So Smart Underachieve?.....	7
Profiles of Underachievement.....	17
Part II: 10 CAUSES OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS	27
Cause 1: Boredom	29
Cause 2: Social-Emotional Needs	45
Cause 3: Not Having Peers	63
Cause 4: Home Life.....	77
Cause 5: Twice-Exceptionality.....	93
Cause 6: Lack of Intrinsic Motivation	107
Cause 7: Lack of Skills.....	121
Cause 8: Lack of Programming or Trained Teachers	137
Cause 9: Not Being Challenged.....	151
Cause 10: Being Too Smart for Their Own Good.....	169
Part III: CONCLUSION	183
When Gifted Students Reach Their Potential	185
<i>References</i>	189
<i>About the Author</i>	196

How Can Someone So Smart Underachieve?

By definition, gifted students are smart. When students are identified gifted by school districts, they have typically performed in the top 5% or higher as compared to all of the other students who took a norm-referenced test. That means they have the potential to be the brightest amongst their peers. Given that they are smart, gifted students always do well in school, which is an environment designed for smart people to thrive, correct? Not so fast on that one. Children identified as gifted do not always make for the best students. There are other factors that play into good grades, such as motivation, effort, interaction, participation, completion of work, being organized, and test-taking and study skills, among others. Just because someone is intelligent does not mean he will apply this to his academics. In fact, he may use his intelligence to avoid schoolwork, getting by on his natural ability, rather than developing the skills needed to be successful in a school setting. This type of student is an underachiever.

Definition of Underachievement

One place to start when defining the term *underachievement* is more clearly defining what it means to be an underachiever. In the current educational environment of data and testing, everything can be evaluated, measured, predicted, and/or disseminated. Yet, determining whether a child is an underachiever is not something you would call a measurable goal. There is not a test that can determine if a student is an underachiever. Instead, it is something that presents itself in spurts and glimpses, and by the time the student is correctly identified as under-

achieving, it might be too late to get him back on track. Many times, in fact, underachievement is in the eye of the beholder. A student in one class could be perceived as performing well above his peers, and yet in another class, he is considered to be average or even falling behind. What is the true indicator of the achievement of which this student is capable?

Dowdall and Colangelo (1982) described three underlying themes in the definition of gifted underachievement:

1. underachievement as a discrepancy between *potential* achievement and actual achievement,
2. underachievement as a discrepancy between *predicted* achievement and actual achievement, and
3. underachievement as a failure to develop or use potential.

Grades are a typical measure of achievement. If a student receives an A in a class, she is performing at a high level, but if that student is earning a C, she might only be at a basic level. The problem is that grades can be very subjective. This is something that teachers do not like to admit very often, but grading lacks something that every standardized test must have: reliability. This is the ability to perform at a level and achieve a certain score, and then if the student repeats the same performance, he should receive the same score. This is not always the case with grades. The element of bias, whether positive or negative, can factor into grades, or you may have a teacher who places a lot of emphasis on effort and not mastery. If a teacher takes off points because something is turned in late, is that evaluating that student's ability to show what he has learned, or is it more of a reflection of that student's lack of responsibility, not a skill being measured by a standard? Grades do not always reflect a true picture of the achievement of a student.

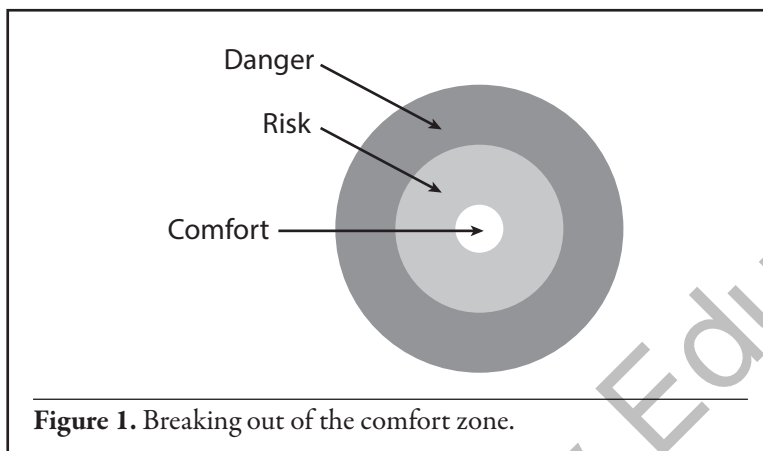
Another problem is that a student can be getting A's but may not be reaching his full potential. Gifted students can easily become efficient with their effort. School can turn into a game of doing enough to get the desired grade, but not really pushing oneself to the highest levels of one's abilities. Let us be honest: Pushing oneself all of the time can be exhausting. No one wants to make more work for himself than necessary, so if you can figure out a way to get a good grade without having to give it your best, many times this is the route you will take.

As teachers, we get a pretty good sense of what students are capable of. The trick is challenging these students enough so that they are willing to push themselves to the levels where they are stretching their potential.

There are a lot of gray areas that can make the identification of underachievers difficult. For example, a gifted student might exceed expectations in one subject area, but because of a lack of interest or confidence, does not do well in another. Sometimes underachievement can even be related to the teacher rather than the subject. A student might be the best math student in a fourth-grade class, but due to a teacher's style or even a personality conflict, she might struggle in fifth-grade math. Some teachers see gifted students as intimidating or think they are showing signs of disrespect by questioning what goes on in the classroom. Students, however, find it difficult to grow in an environment where they are condemned for stretching their thinking.

Other times the student might have the ability but lacks the confidence, making the issue a social-emotional one. A student might test gifted in math but is told that girls typically do not do well in this subject, and she actually begins to believe it. Or someone who does not like to be criticized is not willing to show his talents as a writer for fear of being told he is no good. It can sometimes turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy, as a gifted student gets a bad grade and then comes to believe that he can do no right. Why bother trying? If students develop this self-concept, it can be very difficult for them to prevent themselves from continuing to spiral downward.

It can also be a challenge to, well, you know, challenge students. As teachers, we walk a fine line between pushing our students to the next level and pushing students to where they feel overwhelmed. Think of it like a target (see Figure 1). In the center of the target is the comfort zone. This is where students are learning content they are already familiar with and are not really being challenged. It might feel comfortable, but there is very little learning going on and certainly no growth. In order to grow students, you have to guide them into the risk zone. There are thousands of strategies to get students into this zone, but no matter which method is used, students should be pushed a little out of their comfort zone, either because the content is something they know nothing about or because they are thinking about it in a different way.



This is where students experience the growth and learning we want all students to achieve.

Then, there is the danger zone. This is when a teacher takes a student to a place where he shuts down, either because he is so uncomfortable he is unwilling to learn or the challenge seems like too much of a risk to take. But the challenge is to push students close to the danger zone because the further into risk they are, the more learning takes place. Adding to this challenge is that different students have different target ranges. You can push some students out of their comfort zones, and they adapt. Yet others have a small range, where even a little push might put them in the danger zone. Like any good teacher, one has to be able to differentiate. If you try to teach to one level at one place, or to the middle, as happens in many cases, you will only grow those students and not the high- and low-achieving students. You have to be able to move up and down the spectrum, challenging students who are able and building the stamina of those who might not be ready to be challenged but have the potential.

With all of this uncertainty and lack of a concrete definition, the simplest way to describe underachievement is as *the discrepancy between a child's school performance and his or her ability index as determined by an IQ score*. In other words, if a student tests in the 95th percentile in science, it would be expected that the student's grades in science reflect

his or her abilities. This is a comparison between a student's potential and his or her grades.

The good news about underachievement is that it is a behavior, not ability. In other words, underachievers are capable of performing at a high academic level; they just are exhibiting behaviors that are preventing them from doing so. This could be due to discipline issues, a lack of organization, effort, or many other causes that have nothing to do with intelligence. With the right strategies in place, an underachieving student can get back on the right path and reach his potential.

Statistics of Underachievement in the Gifted Population

Just how many gifted students are exhibiting behaviors of underachievement? You were probably hoping for a chart or graph showing the steady increase of underachieving gifted students over the past 20 years or some other data-based talking point. Unfortunately, because there is much debate about what the definition of *underachieving gifted* is, it is challenging to categorize this group of students. Thankfully, underachievers in gifted education are sort of like spotting something obscene; there is no clear definition, but you will know them when you see them. And teachers are seeing a lot of them. When a needs assessment was conducted by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, the Number 1 issue concerning the field of gifted education was the underachievement of gifted students (Renzulli, Reid, & Gubbins, 1992).

Anywhere from 10% to 50% of gifted students suffer from underachievement (Hoffman, Wasson, & Christianson, 1985; Richert, 1991). The varying statistics also depend on gender. In a study by Weiss (1972), 25% of gifted females were considered underachievers, compared to 50% of males. More alarming is that 18% to 25% of students who drop out of high school have been identified as gifted (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008). These are students who have the ability to achieve great things, and yet they are not even able to meet the minimum requirements of high school. Somewhere along the way,

something got these students off track. Even if that underachieving student is able to get by on his innate ability and graduate, his underachievement behaviors may follow him to college and beyond. In a study on a group of gifted students (Peterson, 2000), researchers split the students into two categories—high achieving and underachieving. One hundred percent of the high-achieving students went on to a 4-year college, compared to only 87% of the underachievers. Out of those students who went on to a 4-year college, 83% of the high achievers graduated, but nearly half of the underachievers did not (47%). The patterns of behavior that cause underachievement then follow these students into their adult lives. A study of underachieving gifted students 13 years after high school (McCall, Evahn, & Kratzer, 1992) showed they tended to not have the stability in their careers and even their marriages that high achievers did, displaying similar characteristics as they did as students, such as low self-concept, low perception of abilities, lack of persistence, and the inability to accept responsibility for their actions. One of the toughest things is to convince students that these behaviors do not just turn themselves off when they exit the schoolhouse. The learned behaviors carry over into the real world and can affect their success as adults.

Regardless of statistics, there are enough of these students to be concerned, and something needs to be done to reverse the behaviors that cause underachievement.

How Underachievement Can Be Overlooked

The number of underachieving gifted students may be even higher, because in some cases, underachievement can be overlooked. An example would be a gifted student in a regular education classroom. The teacher typically focuses most of her attention on two areas—discipline and low-performing students. She wants to make sure students are not falling too far behind. Thus, if a student is getting B's or even C's, it is not as concerning as a student who is on the verge of failing. If the student getting B's or C's has the ability to be achieving A's, however, he is underachieving. How does one address such a problem when there are students who are performing far worse and the teacher only has so much

attention to give? Sometimes a classroom is like a field hospital. There are several people coming in with injuries. The attention is usually given to those who are injured most critically, and the ones who are wounded but will most likely live are kept comfortable but not given the same amount of attention. If a gifted student never raised his hand or participated in class—but also did not stand out by disrupting the learning environment for others—the teacher might simply think the student is doing his best and achieving to the ability he has shown. In reality, this student might only be scratching the surface of his abilities—rather than delving deep into his potential. Because some students are so clever, they learn to play the game of school—you know, the game where you do what you are told, turn in your assignments on time, and appear to be the model student. These students have developed the ability to coast through their classes and take shortcuts that enable them to get the work done, but not achieve at their highest level. They are not identified as underachieving because they are able to operate under the radar, and the teacher may not even be aware that the student is not working to his potential. Some of the actions these students might take include (Post, 2015):

- » taking “easier” classes to avoid more effort;
- » avoiding competitive academic activities, such as the debate team or math contests, to evade potentially envious reactions from peers;
- » refusing to try anything that might lead to failure or rejection, such as auditioning for the lead in the school play;
- » procrastinating until the last minute to see how quickly they can write a paper before a deadline;
- » taking pride in only reading SparkNotes and still getting A’s in their AP English class;
- » avoiding opportunities to challenge themselves when given the chance by teachers or assignments; or
- » giving minimal responses to assignments—enough to answer the question but not enough to probe it at a deeper level (para. 4).

Anytime this student can get by on minimal effort, he has, in effect, “outsmarted” the game of school. It might even be something he takes pride in.

Misunderstandings and Myths of Underachievement

Oftentimes, when a student is not working up to his potential, we label him with the L-word—*lazy*. If you looked at the issue through this lens, the student is to blame. This is not always the case. There might be other factors contributing to his behavior. We must be careful not to dismiss the student and instead try to diagnose the cause of the behavior and address it. Many times the cause of the behavior is actually the B-word—*bored*. And why is the student bored? Because the unique needs this gifted student possesses are not being met or even acknowledged. Many times, underachievement is caused by a mismatch between the student and his school environment (as cited in Siegle & McCoach, 2001). Of course, sometimes the student is just being lazy, but it is important to develop strategies to help him be more engaged.

Another misconception often made with gifted students is that they are all motivated by grades. Educators believe that gifted students want to display their intelligence in the form of grades due to their intrinsic love of learning. Although grades motivate some gifted students, grades do not motivate others at all, but their love of learning may manifest in other ways. A student might learn everything he possibly can about a favorite band, analyzing the music, evaluating the changes in styles from album to album, and even creating similar music. He might spend most of his waking moments listening to this music, but this motivation might not translate to the classroom. Or what about the girl who uses her talents to create jewelry, even going so far as to sell it on Etsy and turning a profit? The creative outlet motivates her, as well as the financial benefits of selling the jewelry. It is great this student is learning valuable 21st-century skills that will certainly benefit her in life, but how does that manifest itself on an achievement test?

The motivation for some might involve being socially accepted. Classmates might view being the smartest kid in the class as negative. There is also the added difficulty that some gifted students have in social situations because they relate better to people who think like them, which may not be children their own age. These students may value being “cool” or being liked by others as opposed to being viewed as smart or a “nerd.” Because of this, gifted students may mask their high abilities in order to fit in better.

What Can Be Done About Underachievement Amongst Gifted Students?

Just as there is no one type of underachieving student, there is no single way to help these students. There are various strategies that can be used to reverse underachievement. Sometimes combining different strategies might be more effective than a single strategy. And each student is different, so you will have to use different combinations, experimenting to find which one is the most effective.

All of these various strategies typically fall under three categories (Whitmore, 1980):

- » **Supportive strategies:** These strategies allow students to feel they are part of a “family,” versus the “factory” of school. Such strategies would involve holding class meetings to discuss student concerns, designing lessons based on the needs and interests of students, and allowing students to bypass assignments on subjects in which they have previously shown competency through preassessment.
- » **Intrinsic strategies:** How do you get someone who does not care about school to care about school? These strategies incorporate the idea that students’ self-concepts as learners are tied closely to their desire to achieve academically. A classroom that invites positive attitudes is likely to encourage achievement. In these classrooms, teachers encourage attempts, not just successes. Students have a place where they can take risks and fail,