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Introduction

The greatest achievement of the human spirit is to live up to one's opportunities and make the most of one's resources.

—Luc de Clapiers

Underachievement is among the most frustrating and bewildering education issues parents and educators face. It is not a crisis of a certain group of people; it is a very real factor in the lives of students from both low and high socioeconomic groups and from rural as well as urban areas. Although it is more common among males, it can also be an issue for females. Underachievement often surfaces around middle school and can continue into high school and beyond (Peterson & Colangelo, 1996). A majority of male underachievers are already underachieving during seventh grade, compared to a majority of female underachievers, who begin to underachieve during eighth and ninth grade (Peterson & Colangelo, 1996). Some researchers have suggested that as high as 50% of gifted students underachieve at some point. However, the extent of underachievement among gifted students is difficult to measure for two reasons. First, there is no universally accepted

definition of giftedness. Second, some controversy surrounds what criteria should be used to define underachievement.

On the surface, educators and parents may view academic underachievement as a motivation issue. However, underperforming is much more complex than simply not being motivated. Additionally, several factors contribute to individuals being motivated. Students fail to engage and fail to achieve for a variety of reasons. The purpose of this book is to review the reasons why students are not achieving to their full potential and to discuss strategies that they and others in their environment can consider to help reverse their underachievement.

In the early 1990s, Csikszentmihalyi (1993) coined the term *flow* to describe peak experiences people have. During these experiences, individuals are completely absorbed in what they are doing and often lose track of time. Generally speaking, flow occurs when activities offer a high degree of challenge in areas where individuals perceive themselves as possessing a high degree of skill. Maximum performance occurs during these flow experiences. Flow occurs when individuals have clear goals, decisiveness, the merging of action and awareness, complete (yet effortless) concentration, a sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, an altered sense of time, immediate feedback, and a focus totally on the activity without regard to self (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). One goal of parents and educators can be to help young people become more engaged so they can have flow experiences. My own work (Siegle & McCoach, 2005b) has shown that students who believe they have the necessary skills to perform a task, who find the task meaningful, and who feel supported in their efforts tend to embrace learning and achieve. Unfortunately, these conditions are often not present for many gifted and talented students in school.

Gentry (Gentry, Rizza, & Gable, 2001) has suggested that five interrelated concepts should underlie educational programs for gifted and talented students: challenge, choice, interest, enjoyment, and personal meaning. Many gifted students are not being academically challenged because they have long ago mastered the content they are being asked to complete (Reis et al., 1993). This is particularly true during the early elementary years. It can be problematic for students because they fail to develop the self-discipline, work habits, and effective study

skills that they need once the curriculum does become challenging. A second danger is that they do not come to expect school to be an exciting place for them to grow or to learn new things.

Gifted and talented programs have traditionally focused on identifying students' interests and strengths and providing them with opportunities to explore their passions (Renzulli, 2012). Unfortunately, when economic times are difficult, gifted and talented programs are often the first to be cut (Purcell, 1994). Gifted and talented students also spend the majority of their school experience in the regular classroom where differentiation and choice options are limited (Archambault et al., 1993). Although teachers may want to provide appropriate educational opportunities for the gifted and talented students in their classroom, few teachers have received the necessary training to understand the needs of gifted and talented students and how best to serve them (Archambault et al., 1993).

Educators are not the only group responsible for making school more meaningful for students; parents also play a role. The importance parents place on schoolwork and the type of work ethic they model for their children also directly influence the meaningfulness and enjoyment young people associate with school. Parents who are unhappy with the educational opportunities their gifted and talented offspring is receiving can inadvertently sabotage the child's educational achievement. This is particularly true when parents share their concerns with the student. Parents have a duty to advocate for appropriate educational experiences for their children, but they should also not impugn the importance of school and education.

Although underachievement is not a prominent area of research in general education, it is a major area of concern in gifted education. When The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented conducted a national needs assessment on issues related to gifted education, the underachievement of gifted students was the highest area of concern (Renzulli, Reid, & Gubbins, 1991). Colangelo (2003) reported that underachievement was the problem most often addressed by counselors in his center for gifted students. In fact, entire careers have been built around counseling and reversing the underachievement patterns of gifted students (Rimm, 1996).

Because humans are diverse and complex beings, decades of research and counseling experiences in the field of gifted education have not produced a single “silver bullet” to solve this perplexing issue. However, promising practices exist, and many individuals have been successful in helping students turn their underachievement around (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995; Rimm, 1995; Whitmore, 1980). Underachieving students have traditionally benefitted from counseling interventions, modifications in their curriculum, or a combination of both. What works for one student may not work for another. An individual student may find a topic interesting while another student finds it mundane. What motivates one individual to pursue a challenging course of action holds little relevance to another individual. Although achievers share some central beliefs about themselves and their attitudes to school, underachievers differ much more from each other on these issues (McCoach & Siegle, 2003a). Therefore, no single plan for reversing underachievement works with every student who is not achieving to his or her potential. However, because achievers do share some common characteristics, this information is useful to consider when helping low-achieving students reverse their underachievement pattern.

What we do know is that if nothing is done, many underachievers will not catch up after they leave high school. The greater their underachievement, the less likely they will reverse it. Students with high IQ scores and mediocre grades tend to produce in life what students with average IQ scores and mediocre grades produce. In other words, their life accomplishments are more closely related to their grades than to their academic potential. Their unexplored talents represent potential loss for society and for their own self-fulfillment. However, students with highly educated parents and students with high aspirations have a greater chance of catching up and reversing this pattern (McCall, 1994). Therefore, extra attention needs to be given to students of poverty and students from traditionally underrepresented groups.

So, why do some gifted students fail to perform at a level commensurate with their abilities? What happens to underachieving gifted students in occupational settings if they do not achieve academically during their adolescent years? How can parents and educa-

tors help gifted students reach their potential? Can anything be done to reverse underachievement? This book reviews research related to these questions and describes several practices that have helped students recognize their potential and strive to achieve it.

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What Is Underachievement?

We learn more by looking for the answer to a question and not finding it than we do from learning the answer itself.

—Lloyd Alexander

Who are gifted underachievers? Informally, students whose grades have dropped, who do not complete their homework, or who put off completing projects could certainly be candidates. More formally, controversy surrounds the processes of defining both giftedness and underachievement. Therefore, identifying gifted underachieving students can be difficult for two reasons. First, no universally accepted definition of giftedness exists. Theories of what constitutes giftedness (Sternberg & Davidson, 2005) and what criteria to use in identifying gifted students (Hunsaker, 2012; Johnsen, 2011) abound. However, the field of gifted education has never reached consensus on either a theory or an identification system. Second, disagreement surrounds how to define underachievement. When attempting to identify gifted underachievers, some apply the colloquial expression, “I know it when I see it,” a phrase made famous by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when describing the threshold test for por-

nography. Similarly, parents with a child who is not performing as expected recognize underachievement without a formal diagnosis. A related issue concerns the value judgment surrounding the term *underachievement*. Whose standards, expectations, or values should be used to determine whether a student is underachieving?

Who Is Gifted?

It is beyond the scope of this book to fully answer the questions, “What is giftedness?” or “Who is gifted?” Readers who are interested in the topic from a theoretical perspective will enjoy reading Sternberg and Davidson’s (2005) excellent edited volume, *Conceptions of Giftedness*, or Dai’s (2010) text, *The Nature and Nurture of Giftedness*. The National Association for Gifted Children (2010) recently released a position paper on the topic. It provides some guidance for practitioners as they struggle with the concept. I have included the full text of the NAGC position paper in the Appendix. The NAGC definition suggests:

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).

The development of ability or talent is a lifelong process. It can be evident in young children as exceptional performance on tests and/or other measures of ability or as a rapid rate of learning, compared to other students of the same age, or in actual achievement in a domain. As individuals mature through childhood to adolescence, however, achievement and high levels of motivation in the domain become the primary characteristics of their giftedness. Various factors can either

enhance or inhibit the development and expression of abilities. (para. 1–2)

For the most part, gifted and talented students in the elementary years are probably those who do things a little earlier and a little better than other students of the same age. They are also those who could be doing things earlier or better if they had been given appropriate opportunities. Many students in this country have not been given appropriate educational opportunities for their giftedness to surface and flourish. This is particularly true for students from underserved populations. These include students of color, students from poverty, and in some cases, students from rural and urban populations.

As students grow older, their advanced abilities become more specialized, and potential is expected to manifest itself. Therefore, gifted underachievers are those who fail to further develop the advanced skills they initially demonstrated or those whose untapped potential failed to materialize. In both cases, it is a discrepancy between what is and what might be. As stated in Chapter 1, it is talent lost—both to the student and to society.

Discrepancy

McCall (1994) suggested that “underachievers do not necessarily have bad grades—just grades not as good as one might expect” (p. 16). This may be particularly true for gifted underachievers. Most definitions of underachievement include a discrepancy between potential (expected performance), often measured by a test, and achievement (actual performance), often measured by achievement tests or school grades (Baum et al., 1995; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Emerick, 1992; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 1997; Supplee, 1990; Whitmore, 1980). Practitioners, researchers, and scholars generally agree conceptually that underachievement is a discrepancy between expected and actual performance, but they differ in how they operationalize the discrepancy between potential and performance.