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Series Preface

The Practical Strategies Series in Gifted Education offers teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and other interested parties up-to-date instructional techniques and information on a variety of issues pertinent to the field of gifted education. Each guide addresses a focused topic and is written by scholars with authority on the issue. Several guides have been published. Among the titles are:

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Underachievement by gifted students has long puzzled educators, parents, and even gifted students themselves. Although definitions of underachievement vary, all include a discrepancy between some measure of a child's ability and his or her achievement (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995; Butler-Por, 1987; Colangelo, Kerr, Christensen, & Maxey, 1993; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Emerick, 1992; Lupart & Pyryt, 1996; Redding, 1990; Rimm, 1997; Supplee, 1990; Whitmore, 1980; Wolfe, 1991).

The variations in definitions of underachievement come from how ability and achievement are measured. Thus, some definitions rely specifically on differences between IQ and achievement test scores, while others might use grades or school production as measures of achievement. These operational definitions can cause great differences in how and why many gifted students are considered to be underachievers. For example, students who show no discrepancy between IQ and achievement test scores might not be recognized as underachievers by some definitions, but would, nevertheless, be considered underachievers by their teachers and parents if they earn poor grades in school. Additionally, using precise test scores alone would give one an underestimate of the number

of underachievers. Reis and McCoach (2000) indicate that although precise operational definitions provide clarity for research, they lack flexibility for identifying specific causes of underachievement.

There's rarely a clear cause and effect relationship when a child underachieves. Instead, there are usually multiple and complex causes of underachievement. Reis and McCoach (2002) developed two categories of causes: environmental factors and factors within the individual. Within the environmental category, unchallenging classrooms, peer pressures, isolation from classmates, and family dynamics are included. The individual category consists of internalizing issues, such as depression and anxiety, and externalizing issues including rebellion and nonconformity, learning problems, deficits in self-regulation, and social immaturity.

Cultural diversity represents a further variation in the environmental factors that cause underachievement. There is little research on the unique barriers faced by minority students who underachieve (Ford, 1996; Reis, Hébert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995). Ford and Tyson (2004) maintain that some educators operate in a culturally blind fashion and pretend cultural differences don't exist. Furthermore, if current identification approaches are biased, as many assume, and fail to identify gifted minority students (Baldwin, 1987; Ford; Frasier & Passow, 1994), they will also fail to identify underachieving gifted students from these populations. Also, family and peer definitions of achievement often differ in varying subcultures, sometimes making it difficult to use interventions successful in the mainstream culture.

Characteristics of Underachievement

Underachievers tend to be disorganized. They often dawdle, forget homework, lose assignments, and misplace books; they daydream, don't listen, look out the window, or talk too much to other children. They have poor study skills or none at all. Some underachievers are slow and perfectionistic and don't finish their work. On the other hand, some will complete their assignments quickly, but are too concerned about being finished first to do quality work.

Some underachievers never read books for fun, while others immerse themselves in reading as an escape. Such students especially like to read when they're supposed to be doing homework. Television, computers, or video games may also serve as alternative escapes for underachieving students.

Creative underachievers may have many unusual ideas, but rarely bring their ideas to closure. They seem unable to complete what they begin. Their parents often refer to them as "marching to the beat of a different drummer," and they may be described as "too creative" for school (Smutny, 2004).

Underachievers often use innumerable defenses. School is "boring" when they're young and "irrelevant" when they're older. Their poor grades, which they say don't matter, are typically blamed on "terrible teachers." They think drama, sports,

music, or having a social life is more important than schoolwork. “Who wants to be a geek anyway?” they retort. Some call achievement their parents’ goal, not theirs, and blame their problems on “unfair” comparisons with siblings or “unfair” pressures by their parents. All underachievers are definitely not the same, and most can exhibit any number of these characteristics.

Internal Locus of Control

Underlying the poor study habits, disorganization, and excuses about their underachievement is a feeling of lack of personal control over their educational success. Underachievers don’t really believe they can reach their goals, even if they work harder. Siegle (2004) describes such feelings as a lack of self-efficacy, and he indicates that people with low self-efficacy are more likely to avoid challenging activities. They set their goals either too high or too low; as a result, they guarantee failure. Such students often want to be millionaires, professional football or baseball players, rock stars, computer geniuses, Olympic gymnasts, or company presidents, and they have magical ideas about the efforts necessary to arrive at these lofty goals. They haven’t yet discovered what *work* actually means and can’t build firm self-confidence because they haven’t learned a real sense of effort.

It’s from actual achievement that one develops confidence. Underachievers have denied themselves the opportunity to build confidence because they direct their energies toward avoiding the relationship between effort and outcome. Siegle (2004) adds that, “years of failure can lower students’ confidence . . . so they refuse to risk another failure. . . .” (p. 31). Figure 1, Rimm’s laws, addresses the development of self-confidence, as well as many other issues relating to children affected by underachievement discussed throughout this book.

Competition

We live in a competitive society, and even families and schools are competitive with one another. Underachievers often have highly competitive feelings, but they may not be obvious.