



4: UNDERACHIEVEMENT

What do we mean by underachievement?

When embarking on any consideration of underachievement in your school, first ensure that colleagues are agreed on a definition.

INTRODUCTION

Underachievement can be defined as an inability or failure to perform appropriately for one's age or talents, i.e. unfulfilled potential. Given this definition, however, it can clearly be extremely hard to identify underachievers, and to note when underachievement is taking place.

Tests, such as Cognitive Ability Tests and IQ-type tests, can be some help in some subjects, when compared with the results of classroom-based assessment tasks and work. However, if pupils are disengaged when undertaking them, the tests will not necessarily highlight potential; nor is IQ any longer considered an adequate indicator of potential ability in all areas. A wider spread and more varied mix of methods – multiple criteria, including teachers' own judgements (especially if exercised after staff have had training on assessment and identification of pupils' abilities) - are likely to identify the underachievement existing in a school on a more realistic scale. (Teachers should however beware of bias in their own attitudes when assessing potential, e.g. preconceptions about pupil behaviour; they should also be aware of the difficulty of holistic judgements about pupils if assessment is fragmented between subject departments.)

Different underachievers may exhibit a variety of characteristics. A comprehensive model has not yet been devised that can organise educationalists' current understanding of underachievement. Until then, 'characteristics checklists' may be especially useful. Montgomery (1996) suggests that the presence in a pupil of five or more of the following indicators should lead teachers to suspect underfunctioning:

- 'inconsistent pattern of achievement in schoolwork subjects
- inconsistent pattern of achievements within a subject area
- discrepancy between ability and achievements, with ability much higher
- lack of concentration
- daydreaming
- clowning and other work-avoidance strategies
- poor study skills
- poor study habits
- non-completion or avoidance of assignments
- refusal to write anything down
- overactivity and restlessness
- overassertive and aggressive or oversubmissive and timid social behaviour
- inability to form and maintain social relationships with peers
- inability to deal with failures
- avoidance of success
- lack of insight about self and others
- poor literacy skills
- endless talking, avoiding doing
- membership of stereotyped 'minority' group (not caucasian, male, middle-class)'.

WHY IS UNDERACHIEVEMENT AN IMPORTANT FOCUS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS?

- Current definitions of high ability emphasise the importance of assessing the *potential* of the individual. Teachers are urged to identify pupils with the potential to achieve, not just with achieved potential. Such a model of ability, however, highlights the fact that there may be significant numbers of pupils for whom there are discrepancies between their potential and their predicted performance. If schools are to be accountable for their success in educating the more able, they must address such discrepancies in them, as in all other parts of school populations.
- Many teachers still find identification of able pupils difficult, while they may feel more confident in identifying the *less* able, including less able underachievers. Underachieving *able* pupils may thus be especially at risk of being overlooked, and of receiving inadequate provision in schools.
- In many schools, classrooms and peer groups, the prevailing social climate does not accept or value high achievement in all areas of the curriculum. That climate will be exceptionally oppressive, and will create exceptionally powerful disincentives to high performance, for those who are exceptionally able, i.e. it might be argued that external pressures on the highly able to underachieve could be even higher than on their less able peers.

- Research in the USA indicates that ‘culturally different’ and ‘disadvantaged’ groups are present in comparatively limited numbers in gifted programmes in American schools (Montgomery, 1996). It is likely that there is a similar pattern in the UK. Unless it is found that certain culturally different or disadvantaged groups have lower ratios of highly able pupils within them (research in this area is continuing, but is difficult), schools need to fulfil the spirit of their equal opportunities policies by investigating the underachieving able in such groups in particular. The same need is likely to be there amongst the groups of male and female pupils considered ‘highly able’ in different subjects.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

- Without a clear understanding of and agreement on how to assess and identify the potential of more able pupils, as well as their existing levels of achievement, a school will not be able to tackle their problems of underachievement.
- Butler-Por (1987) argues that underachievement is not caused in the main by inability to do better but by either a conscious or an unconscious choice. Research, e.g. McClelland, Yewchuk and Mulcahy (1993), has shown that there are two main sets of factors affecting the performance of able underachievers: emotional and motivational factors, and factors concerned with strategies for learning. They believe that, when factors from the two sets are combined and interact, they seem to have the powerful consequence of preventing able pupils from becoming high achievers.
- Emotional and motivational factors include the possibility that pupils:
 - may be unaware of their own potential: they may lack insight about themselves and others (Butler-Por, 1987)
 - may have expectations that are ‘too low and too limited, or too narrow and too stereotypic’ (Montgomery, 1996); Butler-Por (1987) suggests that this factor can manifest itself as a lack of clear personal goals and values
 - may have a sense of inadequacy and low self-esteem – indeed, they may be vulnerable to disparagement by others (Butler-Por, 1987)
 - may have experienced ‘a high incidence of emotional difficulties’ (Kellmer Pringle, 1970), and/or be prone to depression and anxiety (Butler-Por, 1987)
 - may be unmotivated to achieve in school, despite a high self-concept (Montgomery, 1996)
 - may have a fear of failure (Montgomery, 1996)
 - may have a fear of success (Montgomery, 1996)
 - may have a habit of blaming others and ‘acts of chance’ (Montgomery, 1996).

Research shows that once pupils who exhibit such tendencies do underachieve, these tendencies can become self-fulfilling and perpetuate the pattern of underachievement. An individual who is unaware of his/her own potential may become merely depressed by remarks such as ‘You could do better’, ‘You need to pull your socks up’, etc., thus continuing to underfunction. Freeman (1991) studied the way that students identified as

'gifted' feared they might be unworthy of the title and so avoided any challenge in case they were found wanting, explaining their failures away by claiming that they did not mind or had found tasks uninteresting; as a result, they fell further and further behind in school, only succeeding on tests that did not require any previous knowledge and thus failing to fulfil their 'early promise'.

Some emotional and motivational factors, Butler-Por (1987) shows, can stem from the influence of family and family background:

- 'hostility in family relations
- rejection of the value of that member of the family [i.e. the pupil]
- [unreasoning and excessive] parental expectations
- lack of support for emotional and social development and stability
- lack of interest in the child'.

Other factors that should be added include:

- the background of a family, cultural, social or religious group with different values or goals from those predominant at school
- the influence of a school and/or peer group ethos which does not value high achievement, or does not value it uniformly or consistently (e.g. in rugby, but not in physics)
- a conflict between the goals stated by school and the personal goals of the individual.

➤ Factors connected with learning strategies include the possibility that pupils:

- may have specific learning disabilities or difficulties, e.g. developmental dysphasia, developmental dyslexia, etc. (Montgomery, 1996)
- may have sensory and/or physical impairments (Montgomery, 1996)
- may not perform well in test situations (McClelland, Yewchuk and Mulcahy, 1993)
- 'may achieve below expectation in one or all of the basic skill areas: reading, language arts, mathematics' (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may submit work that is often unfinished or poorly done (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may have poor study skills
- may have poor work habits
- may avoid trying new activities (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may show tendencies to perfectionism and self-criticism (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may have difficulty functioning in a group (of any size) (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may set goals unrealistically, too high or too low (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may dislike practice or drill work, memorisation and mastery (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may find it hard to focus attention and concentrate on tasks (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may have difficulty in making and maintaining peer relationships and friendships (McClelland et al., 1993).

- There is a further important factor in underachievement: that of the influence of teachers. Kellmer Pringle (1970) found that it was teachers themselves who exert the strongest and most lasting influence through their personalities – particularly on able underachievers who lack appropriate role models at home. Kellmer Pringle argues that effective teachers can improve pupils' self-concept and morale, offer targeted support, provide pupils with opportunities to work independently and to rediscover their commitment to and excitement about learning. Butler-Por, too (1987), found that identification of pupils with common difficulties, combined with intensive and sympathetic teacher intervention, enabled them to understand the problems that held them back and to make notable progress. It follows then, conversely, that negative teacher attitudes to underachievers, or less teacher time spent with them, or their stereotyping as 'less able', or belonging to certain groups of whom teachers might have lower expectations or ask less, are only likely to reinforce patterns of underachievement.
- Tackling underachievement is not just a matter of improving school performance or of tackling pupil problems with learning strategies. There is a vital pastoral aspect, as those who underachieve often have problems with motivation, socialisation and/or self-image. The pastoral responsibility should be a joint responsibility, to be shouldered from whole school level downwards. It should be shared by senior school management, subject departments, individual teachers, other supporting adults and pupils' parents and families. Addressing underachievement should thus involve ensuring the sensitive writing of many school policy documents, making procedures such as mentoring and counselling as effective as possible, building productive home-school relationships, and much more.

WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN SCHOOL?

- Ensure that you have effective and appropriate assessment and identification procedures in place, and only then collect data on the extent of underachievement amongst pupils. Teare (1997) suggest using an Underachieving Pupil Referral Sheet, and includes a possible format. Where possible draw on several sources and kinds of information, including teacher judgements, perhaps using the 'characteristics checklist' above; don't rely on IQ-type tests alone.
- Collate and analyse information on the predominant factors common to groups of underachieving pupils, e.g. whether they are emotional and motivational factors or those connected with learning strategies or what combination of both.
- Some distinctive groups where underachievement is suspected may warrant further, more detailed research and consideration, e.g. cultural minority groups, or girls or boys in certain subjects.
- If peer or family pressure and/or the school ethos with regard to the nature of achievement is an issue, this should be addressed aggressively but sensitively across

the school and/or wider school community. Teare (1997) makes a number of practical suggestions, e.g.:

- Make it clear across the school that pupils progress at different rates
- Display catchphrases and key messages celebrating motivation and achievement around school
- Promote at least some **enrichment** and **extension** activities that give pupils of all abilities opportunities to achieve (and ensure that pupils are aware of this philosophy)
- Write, and display widely, a code of achievement, and include it in the tutorial programme
- Recognise the achievements of all pupils in all areas of school life, e.g. in assemblies.

Ensure that parents and families are fully involved in, or informed about, such initiatives.

- If emotional and motivational factors are an issue, e.g. personality or social problems, McClelland, Yewchuk and Mulcahy (1993) stress the importance of measures such as mentoring or counselling. This of course should be sympathetic, sensitive and systematic, and may require professional help from outside school. Some schools target pupil groups who are achieving well but whom teachers feel are particularly vulnerable to peer group pressure, e.g. Year 7 boys who, on entry to secondary school, show ability in literacy. (Remember that a good pastoral care programme can benefit all, the achieving and the underachieving.) It may help to fund the participation in enrichment activities of financially disadvantaged pupils. Also, study facilities could be made available for those who have limited space or privacy to work at home.
- If learning strategy factors are an issue, targeted teacher support may be appropriate to tackle predominant problems, e.g. a special cross-curricular course in Year 8 on study skills and efficient work habits; or intensive help with test performance, or with techniques for e.g. improving concentration, group collaboration, setting appropriate goals or finishing work. Liaise with appropriate professionals to provide support for those with specific learning difficulties, sensory or physical impairments, etc.
- Use models for enrichment and extension programmes in school such as that of Renzulli and Reis (1993), which is an inclusive one, accommodating pupils with potential, not just 'able achievers', and which, if implemented effectively, can be highly motivating.
- Ensure that your school has an ongoing cycle of training and discussion in place with regard to the identification of, and provision for, underachieving pupils. Such a cycle could form part of your cyclical able pupil identification procedures. Discussions should address the necessity for a spirit of mutual respect and dignity and joint exploration when working with able pupils, including underachievers, and for a recognition of the needs of the 'whole child'. Teare (1997) suggests that subject departments may need to debate such matters as the relative weighting given by teachers to pupil and parent motivation, the balance between specialism and breadth

in areas of pupil strength, and what limits should be set on the amount of pupil challenge, for example if too much stress or exertion might have deleterious effects.

RECOMMENDED READING

Bleach, K., ed., 1998. *Raising Boys' Achievement in Schools*. Oakhill: Trentham Books.

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Renzulli, J.S. and Reis, S.M., 1993. Using the schoolwide enrichment triad model to provide programs for underserved gifted and talented students. *In: Wallace, B. and Adams, H.B., ed. Worldwide Perspectives on the Gifted Disadvantaged*. Bicester: A B Academic Publishers.

Teare, J.B., 1997. *Effective Provision for Able and Talented Children*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

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