

Underachievement: Another Perspective

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The research and antidotes addressing the causes and consequences of underachievement among gifted students are addressed in the classical and contemporary literature. Social and emotional real and perceived issues as well as diagnosed physical causes define underachievement. There is no argument needed to underscore the increasing and sophisticated body of literature that explains underachievement. However, there is a need to provide another perspective on the causes and cures of underachievement that are recognized, and maybe, initiated within the context of the classroom.

The concept of associating underachievement with “underteaching” should be considered when recognizing, assessing, and responding to underachievement. The nature of “underteaching” is not a deliberate act. In fact, many times “underteaching” is perceived as a compliment to the general nature of giftedness and to the specific gifts of a student. The newly coined term “underteaching” can be defined as the lack of planning and implementation of the curriculum resulting from the teacher’s assumption that gifted learners need less instruction than was planned for them.

The relationship between underachievement and “underteaching” is illustrated in these scenarios:

UNDERTeaching	UNDERACHIEVEMENT
Teacher X tells the students that the skill they are going to learn is new and very difficult to master. Students are asked to pay close attention so that they will learn this difficult skill.	A gifted student is intimidated by the teacher’s soliloquy about the difficulty of the skill they will be taught and students are expected to master. Intimidated by the introduction to the skill, the gifted student withdraws from exerting the effort needed to be successful at mastering the skill.
Teacher Y reinforces that the students are gifted and as a consequence of this ability should be able to read the directions on the page and perform the task at a high level of proficiency for homework. The teacher says that the	The gifted students discuss the homework among themselves with a plethora of emails and telephone calls. Several of the students claim, “They are lost” in the assignment and will just wait until the next day during class to learn

<p>lesson will be explained fully the next day when they discuss and correct their work with the teacher.</p>	<p>the material. However, the next day in class, the teacher says that the students seem to understand and introduces the next lesson. A group of students are “left out” and are easily labeled underachievers for that lesson... the beginning of a pattern that has long-range implications.</p>
<p>Teacher Z is really enthusiastic about enabling the gifted students to embark on an independent study project. She informs them that they will be able to have three weeks to work independently on the project and provides some guidelines: due date, written and oral presentation requirements, rubric for grading. At the end of the three weeks and reviewing the work of the students, the teacher stated that several of the students were underachieving because they could not get the work completed on time and the work was “insufficient” as measured by the indicators on the rubric.</p>	<p>Several of the students discussed with their parents that they had “sufficient evidence” to verify that they were not “really gifted.” When asked how they arrived at this conclusion, the students identified their difficulties with planning and executing their study independently. “I do not know how to research well.” stated one of the gifted students. “Guess, I am not that smart...”</p>

Each of these scenarios represents the concept of “underteaching.” None of these examples are representative of deliberate acts of teacher neglect or incompetency. They are merely acts of overestimating the nature of the gifted and their educational needs in the context of a lesson. These are acts of underestimating the instructional and/or curricular needs of the gifted. Overestimating and underestimating the curricular and instructional needs of the gifted, leading to signs and short and long term behaviors associated with underachievement, are results of the following conditions:

- Inadequate motivational strategies and instructional directions predicated on the erroneous belief that gifted students are usually motivated and can and will determine what to do and how to do it on their own. The misconception that gifted students are always excited to learn and able to direct their learning cannot be generalized to all gifted students and all instructional events. Subsequently, such beliefs endanger rather than facilitate the achievement of gifted students.

- The fallacy that gifted students are easy to teach is a belief that has hindered rather than enhanced achievement among gifted learners. In many contexts, gifted students are more difficult to teach: they are not a homogenous group and have as much heterogeneity among them as their non-gifted peers. They do not all perceive the value of learning a subject or skill in the same way and thus have varied levels of attention and devotion to developing expertise. Time to gain mastery is dependent on many variables that transcend the identification of being gifted.
- It is imperative to recognize that gifted students struggle with developmental readiness in the same manner as their peers. Giftedness should not imply that the label of being gifted is automatically synonymous with the appropriate time and situation to learn and become a scholar in any area.

The definition, response and solutions to underachievement need to be a shared responsibility. Underachievement could be the result of a student's lack of self-regulation: inability to work and understand one's peers, lack of characteristic-appropriate behaviors. Underachievement also could be the result of a teacher's situational lack of "good teaching" to direct and excite achievement.