STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION AMONG THE UNDERACHIEVING GIFTED STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT
The underachievement of gifted children is an area of concern for many parents, teachers and educators generally. Although the study of student underachievement has a long educational history, it is more productive to consider what motivates gifted students to do well. Students tend to be motivated when they find their efforts supported by those around them. In this paper, effort has been made to state the concept of underachievement, causes of underachievement among the gifted learners and strategies for promoting achievement motivation among the underachieving gifted students. The factors that motivate a gifted underachiever to accomplish a given task were explained as well as some motivation strategies like: utility motivation strategies, intrinsic motivation strategies, motivation strategies to recognize growth, motivation strategies to encourage mastery attribution, motivation strategies to enhance environmental perceptions, motivation strategies to promote study skills and motivation strategies for self-regulation. In conclusion, the way and manner parents and teachers can intervene and reverse underachievement of gifted learners both individually and collectively were extensively examined. It was recommended that parents should be role models and must provide their children with opportunities to develop their own interests and areas of giftedness. Teachers in their own case, must know their students, incorporate the students' gifts and must be supportive, kind and open.

Key words: *Strategies, Promotion, Motivation, Underachievement, Gifted.*

INTRODUCTION

There is perhaps no situation more frustrating for parents or teachers than living or working with children who do not perform as well academically as their potential indicates they can. These children are labeled as underachievers, yet few people agree on exactly what this term means. Although the study of student underachievement has a long educational history, it is more productive to consider what motivates students to do well. Students tend to be motivated when they find a task meaningful, believe that they have the skills to do it, and find their efforts supported by those around them.

Early researchers (Raph, Goldberg, and Passsow, 2011) and some recent authors (Davis and Rimm, 2011) have defined underachievement in terms of a discrepancy between a child's school performance and some ability index such as an 1Q score. These definitions, although seemingly clear and succinct, provide little insight to parents and teachers who wish to address this problem with individual students. A better way to define underachievement is to consider the various components.

Underachievement, first and foremost, is a behaviour and as such, it can change over time. Often, underachievement is seen as a problem of attitude or work habits. However, neither habits nor attitude can be modified as directly as behaviours. Thus, referring to "underachieving behaviours" pinpoints those aspects of children's lives which they are most able to alter.

Underachievement is consent and situation specific. Gifted children who do not succeed in school are often successful in outside activities such as sports, social occasions, and after – school jobs. Even a child who does poorly in most school subjects may display a talent or interest in at least one school subject. Thus, labeling a child as an "underachiever" disregards any positive outcomes or behaviours that child displays. It is better to label the behaviours than the child. (For example, the child is "underachieving in Mathematics and language arts" rather than an "underachieving student").

Underachievement is tied intimately to self-concept development. Children who learn to see themselves in terms of failure eventually begin to place self-imposed limits of what is

possible. Any academic successes are written off as “flukes” while low grades serve to reinforce negative self-perceptions. This self-deprecating attitude often results in comments such as “why should I even try? I’m just going to fall anyway,” or “Even if I do succeed, people will say it is because I cheated.” The end product is a low self-concept, with students perceiving themselves as weak in academics. Under this assumption, their initiative to change or to accept a challenge is limited.

How Motivation Contributes to Achievement

Many factors contribute to achievement, motivation being one crucial aspect. Motivated students appear to exhibit three main perceptions. First and foremost, motivated students find value in their school experience. They enjoy what they are doing or believe what they are doing will produce beneficial outcomes. Second, they believe they have the skills to be successful. Third, they trust their environment and expect they can succeed in it. When students value the task or outcome and have positive perceptions of themselves and their opportunities for success, they are more likely to exhibit the following resultant behaviours; (a) implementing self-regulation behaviours, (b) setting realistic expectations, and (c) applying appropriate strategies for academic success. This article offers classroom strategies and tips for motivating students who are struggling to find value in their school-work and feel good about their abilities, who need assistance moving from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, and who need guidance in interpreting their environments.

Gifted students are one group of exceptional learners who are not normally considered at risk for academic failure. We often expect the brightest students to also be the most motivated. Unfortunately, many gifted students seem to lack motivation in school. Watching bright students perform below their potential is a source of frustration for many teachers, parents, and counselors.

Why do some gifted students demonstrate low levels of achievement? Underachievement has at least four potential underlying causes. First, an apparent underachievement problem may be masking more serious physical, cognitive, or emotional issues, such as a learning disability (Moon & Hall, 2008; Reis & McCoach, 2002). Second, underachievement may be symptomatic of a mismatch between students and their school environment. Third, underachievement may result from students’ attitudes about themselves and their schooling. Fourth, lack of self-regulation and study skills may hinder some students from achieving academic success. Each of these reasons requires different intervention strategies. Therefore, educators should attempt to isolate the origin of the underachievement. We also recommend that gifted students who are having difficulty with school should be screened for a wide variety of physical, mental, or emotional issues before focusing on motivation problems (Reis & McCoach; Siegle & McCoach, 2002).

In this article, we focus on four factors that are related to achievement and suggest a variety of strategies that teachers and parents can use to promote motivation and academic success. Students with learning disabilities often exhibit poor academic self-confidence (Baum, 2004; Stone & May, 2002). Further, they benefit from explicit teaching of self-regulation and study strategies (Reis & Ruban, 2004). Therefore, we believe that strategies related to two of the four factors discussed – self – efficacy and self regulation are particularly well suited for use with high-ability students having learning disabilities.

Students engage in a task for two basic reasons; either they enjoy the activity or they value the outcome or byproduct of the activity in some way. Some students are unmotivated to achieve in school because they do not value the outcomes of school nor do they enjoy completing schoolwork: therefore, they see little value in completing their schoolwork. To reverse underachievement that stems from an apparent lack of motivation, we must first determine how to build value into a student’s scholastic experiences. Consider a social studies class that is learning about American government. One student may seek high grades to obtain a college scholarship. Another student may have plans to become a lawyer. A third student may have a strong interest in understanding American government and

politics. Although each of these students is motivated to do well in the social studies class, each values it for a different reason.

Even though students may not enjoy an activity, they may value a reward it outcome or produces (Wigfield, 2004). Students see utility in tasks that are integral to their vision of the future or are instrumental to their pursuit of other goals. Because goals can play an essential role in attaining later outcomes, we should help students see beyond the immediate activity to the long-term benefits it produces. Teachers need to be able to answer the common query "Why do we have to study this?"

Extrinsic motivation involves the drive to receive a reward or positive reinforcement that is external to the activity itself. One way to increase the perceived utility of a tasks is to positively reinforce students for completing the task. Extrinsic motivators include such rewards as stickers, praise, graders, special privileges, prizes, money, material rewards, adult attention, or peer administration. However, teachers should use extrinsic motivators carefully, because providing extrinsic rewards for an intrinsically motivating activity may decrease a person's subsequent intrinsic motivation for that activity (Pintrinch & Shcunk, 2006).

Utility Motivation Strategies

- Educators should explain the purpose for lessons and assignments. At the beginning of every unit, explain to students why mastering these skills or learning this information is important to (a) help them meet their own current needs or wants, (b) provide them with social rewards or opportunities for social advancement, or (c) prepare them for occupational or future successes (Brophy 2008).
- Help students set short and long-term academic goals. Small, short – term goals work better for younger students. An essential feature of the goals is that they be meaningful to students themselves. Goals that adults value may have little meaning to children.
- Help student see beyond the present activity to the long-term benefits it produces. To students, a school assignment may seem unimportant, but they may value such outcomes as acceptance into a prestigious university, a lucrative college scholarship, or a rewarding occupation.
- Invite community members into the classroom. Such individuals can tie the school curriculum to their career activities. Parents can also share how they use various skills they learned in school.

Intrinsic value

Intrinsic value often results from the enjoyment an activity produces for the participant (Wigfield, 2004). When students enjoy scholastic task they are intrinsically motivated to do well. Both their interests and personal relevance produce intrinsic value for a student. Generally, students are intrinsically motivated to pursue activities that are moderately novel, interesting, enjoyable, exciting and optimally challenging. Material that is either too hard or too easy is anti-motivational. When school work is too easy students become bored. When tasks are too difficult, students become frustrated and anxious (Deci & Ryan, 2005).

Intrinsic Motivation Strategies

- Learn about students' interests, and integrate these interests into your instruction.
- Whenever possible, offer students authentic choices about the ways in which they can learn and show mastery of the material in the class. You may want to ask students for ideas about alternative projects or products.
- Students are more likely to become engaged with material that is optimally challenging, so classroom activities should be appropriate to students current knowledge and skill levels. Ideally, a lesson's content should be just above the skill

range of the students. The activity should be something that the students can master, but not without effort and the use of appropriate strategies (Morrone & Schutz, 2000). Ideally, students should be challenged, but not frustrated, by classroom activities.

- One reason for the popularity of computer games is that immediate feedback enhances the psychological impact of the activity. When possible, strive to build opportunities for immediate feedback into classroom activities.
- To the extent that you treat your students as if they already are enthusiastic learners, they will be more likely to become interested in the topic (Brophy, 2008). For example, when introducing a complex topic, refer to it as "interesting" or "intriguing" rather than as difficult.
- Encourage students to think seriously about how their performance in present classes can affect their future goals as well as to explicitly articulate their reasons for choosing or failing to put forth effort in a class.

Motivation Strategies to Recognize Growth

- Videotape students as they are engaged in various activities and encourage parents to do so. Periodically reviewing the recordings helps students realize how much they have improved. For example, a young person who has been taking piano lessons for several years may not think he or she has made any progress. Parents can videotape their child practicing and show the tape to the child 6 months later. The child will be amazed at how much better he or she plays. Without viewing the tape, the child might not perceive that any progress has been made during those 6 months. This technique can be used with any activity in which visible progress can be documented.
- Keep samples of previous academic work, and periodically review students' earlier work with them to show growth and improvement. Students are amazed at how easy their earlier work now appears and how much better they are now able to perform. Student portfolios promote this sort of self reflection. Student should help select work to include in their portfolios for future review.
- Encourage students to compete with themselves by charting their progress. Most children remember their parents' reserving a special spot in their home to mark their height each year. They loved to observe how much they grew. Just as parents chart height, as a teacher you can help children recognize other forms of growth and development. For example, you can record a running list of mastered spelling words or multiplication facts.

Feedback: Attributing Success

The way we compliment students also has an impact on how successful students perceive themselves. Everyone agrees that students should be encouraged to work hard, as effort plays a significant role in achievement. However, students also need to believe they have the skills to succeed. The essential component in complimenting students is helping them realize that skills are developed and that they have acquired the skills necessary to succeed. The feedback must contain (a) recognition of the talent and (b) attribution of its development to the student.

Dweck (2009) demonstrated that students who believe abilities can be developed and are not fixed are more likely to attempt challenging tasks and persevere through difficulties than students who believe abilities are innate. Students who have a performance orientation approach new situations as opportunities to show what they know. These students tend to believe that abilities are fixed. Therefore, they view any mistakes as evidence they lack ability. In contrast, students who have a mastery orientation view new situations as opportunities to acquire new skills or improve their existing skills. Students with a mastery orientation tend to believe that abilities are malleable, and they are more likely to tackle difficult tasks. Although Dweck found that students already gravitate toward one or the

other of these orientations in elementary school, she also found that these orientations are amenable to change.

Gifted students may develop a performance orientation, which may limit their willingness to take academic risks. Gifted students often perceived giftedness as innate, and they may believe, they had very little to do with their giftedness. Although gifted students often do acquire skills more quickly and easily than their peers, they still gain such skills through learning. They may have taught themselves to read or learned to read easily at an early age, but they still learned to read. Gifted students need to realize that the talents they possess are acquired and that they are capable of further developing these talents.

Gifted students also need to understand that just because they find something difficult does not mean they are not smart. For some students, not trying preserves their self image. They do not perceive "not trying" as poor performance; instead, they can rationalize; "It wasn't important" or "I just rushed through it and didn't do my best". Young people often believe that if they need to work hard at school, then they are not smart. In fact, peers often perceive hard working students as less intelligent than students who do well in school without making any visible effort.

Attributing success to ability or effort is a fine line to walk. The essential balancing factor is to acknowledge ability while recognizing that effort went into its development. Educators and parents can help students realize the important role both ability and effort play in talent development. One way to achieve this outcome is through comments made directly to children.

Motivation Strategies to Encourage Mastery Attribution

- Compliment students on the specific skills they have developed by drawing attention to the skill and to its development. This tactic acknowledges the effort without drawing undue attention to it. An example is "you did very well on this Mathematics project. You've learned how to solve equations".
- Use specific rather than general compliments. A general compliment, such as "Good work", does not carry the weight of something more specific, such as "you have learned to provide very good supporting sentences for the topic sentence in your paragraphs". Specific feedback allows students to better appraise their progress by letting them know two things: (a) what specific skill they possess and (b) that they developed it. Both components are necessary. Students will reflect on the comment and think, for example, "Yes, I have learned to write a well organized paragraph".

Of course, compliments must be genuine and earned. Complimenting children for tasks they did not perform well or for unchallenging task can be counterproductive and diminish their trust. Overly effusive and too numerous compliments can backfire. The goal should be to help students recognize their developed skill, not to heap undue praise.

Motivation Strategies to Enhance Environmental Perceptions

- Teachers and parents can discuss with students the obstacles they believe are keeping them form doing well and what options exist for them. This approach includes a discussion of what is within the students' control as well as what is beyond their control. Teaching students to appreciate multiple viewpoints should be part of the discussion. Teachers and parents can help students understand when "standing their ground" is important, when compromise might better serve their interests, and when ignoring the situation is the best course of action
- Avoid letting students use their environment as an excuse. At times, young people may attribute their failures to their environment rather than to themselves. When this situation occurs, a technique such as active listening may help resolve students' concerns (Pickering, 2006).

Motivation Strategies to Promote Study Skills

- If students are not being academically challenged, encourage them to explore opportunities to interact with more challenging and interesting material. Curriculum compacting (Reis, Burns & Renzulli, 1992), an effective process to use with gifted students, lets you give students credit for their knowledge and skills and buys time to pursue more challenging content. Pretesting or reassessing students allows you to evaluate what students already know about the material they are about to cover in class and to ensure that students have the prerequisite skills and knowledge to be successful in the upcoming unit. An ideal pretest includes questions that all student should have mastered as well as questions that, if answered correctly, indicate mastery of upcoming instructional objectives. You can use students' pretest results to deliver instruction that is optimally matched to students' level of mastery. If students have already mastered an instructional objective, allow them time to pursue interest based enrichment opportunities rather than give them "more of the same".
- Evaluate what study skills your students need to be successful. A word of caution! teaching study skills to gifted and talented students before they really need them can be counter productive. Some common study skills include note taking, outlining and using memory mnemonics.
- Teachers and parents can help students organize their work and study time. Greene (2001) recommends that students create a homework book to record upcoming assignments, projects, tests, and events. Students can use colour coded folders or binders. Organizing all handouts and papers in chronological order in subject notebooks may also be helpful. Students can create reminder checklists, one called "at school" and one, "at home". Students should pack their book bag each night before they go to bed, making sure they include all their homework, and keep the book bag in the same place every night. This habit helps avoid forgetting items and eases the morning rush.
- Some gifted students lack self monitoring skills. These skills include monitoring distractibility, practicing delayed gratification and being aware of performance avoidance. The Premack principle, also know as "Grandma's rule", suggests using a more preferred activity as a reward for a less preferred activity. Someone may enjoy exercising but no writing. Therefore, he exercises only after he has written a preset number of pages. Parents often mistakenly reverse Premack's principle, which renders it ineffective. "Okay, I'll let you watch 30 minutes of television and then you need to start your homework" does not work as well as. "As soon as you finish your homework, you may watch some television.
- Students with a performance orientation, which was described earlier, may demonstrate performance avoidance. Such students are motivated by generous reinforcement for success as well as detailed instructions with specific grading criteria.

Motivation Strategies for Self Regulation

- Help students plan schoolwork tasks, and encourage parents to do so also. This approach serves two functions. First, it develops a mindset that the task is double. Young people are often reluctant to begin a task because they are unsure how to begin. Second, it minimizes the unknown. Through planning, students can visualize a task's coming to fruition
- Educators and parents can teach students to set short term attainable goals and to reward themselves once these goals are completed. This skill includes learning to withhold the reward if the task is not completed. For example, a student might reward herself with a half hour of conversation on the telephone with a friend after reading a Social Studies chapter.

- When working with performance avoidant students, provide detailed assignment instructions and include an evaluation rubric when appropriate. Divide larger tasks into smaller task, and recognize the student's performance at each step.
- Teachers and parents can help students set realistic expectations. This skill involves setting goals that are difficult enough to be challenging, yet not so difficult as to be unachievable and discouraging.

Conclusion

Underachievement in gifted children is difficult to reverse, and the longer a child underachieves, the harder it is to reverse. Some experts, however, believe we need to redefine underachievement. Some gifted children, particularly older children, may not excel in school, but achieve a great deal outside of school. For example, a fifteen-year-old gifted student may be getting average grades in school, but may have organized a community tutoring programme for disadvantaged elementary school children. Clearly, such children do not fit into the profile of a gifted underachiever. They do not, for example, suffer from low self esteem as many underachievers do. In these cases, parents and educators need to ask themselves whether they should continue to try to reverse the underachievement in school or help the child succeed in life using the skills the student has to achieve outside of school.

At this juncture, it must be pointed out that gifted and talented underachievers present special concerns in that they are very likely, because of their intellect, to realize the many challenges life will provide them, while at the same time they are more likely to use their intellect to justify withdrawing from the engagement that will enable them to handle the stresses that life provides. Educators and parents need to be sensitive to the special needs of these students and to see the often caustic and aloof style of these students for the anxiety that it covers. Remembering to focus on their emotional needs, not just their intellectual needs, will help these students to grow into their considerable potential.

Recommendations

It is pertinent to point out that both parents and teachers can also intervene and reverse the condition of underachievement among the gifted learners both individually and collectively if they so desire. To achieve this aim the following recommendations are made:

For Parents

- Be a role model: Show your child that you value school. Model how to react when faced with a challenge and discuss the learning that can occur when solving problems
- Provide your child with opportunities to develop his or her own interests and areas of giftedness.
- Help your child understand the cause and effect relationship between effort and achievement. You can keep track of your child's progress by saving schoolwork.
- Monitor and help your child with school assignments.

For Teachers

- Be aware and know your students: Give interest inventories and observe your students. Be aware of their strengths and weaknesses.
- Differentiate: Research by Reis Hebert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley (2013) argues that boredom contributes to underachievement (as cited in Reis & McCoach, 2000). Although a special classroom setting for gifted students would be the most beneficial, this is not always an option. The next best choice is to differentiate assignments for gifted learners.
- Incorporate the child's gifts: When a child is confident in one skill area, he will be more willing to attack a challenging skill if he can incorporate his strengths. This is the easiest way to address student weaknesses.

- Be supportive, kind, and open: All students must feel comfortable and safe in the classroom

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