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Personal achievement characteristics of gifted and talented students: analytic approach

The future of every country depends on the intellectual and spiritual power, creative potential of the younger generation, students' desire to acquire new knowledge, create technological innovations, think creatively and produce constructive solutions. That is why the creation of adequate conditions for the development of gifted students is one of the most pressing problems in modern pedagogical science [2]. This article deals with the problem why one gifted student achieves while another does not. Although the underachievement of gifted students has been the subject of much inquiry and debate [6; 9; 11], very few controlled studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to reverse that underachievement. The underachievement of gifted students represents a loss of valuable human resources for the nation, as well as an unrealized fulfillment for the individual. Determining why some high-ability students demonstrate low levels of achievement is difficult because underachievement occurs for many different reasons:

1. An apparent underachievement problem masks more serious physical, cognitive, or emotional issues such as learning disabilities, attention deficits, emotional disturbances, psychological disorders, or other health impairments. In this case, the treatment of academic underachievement should be secondary to the treatment of the primary disorder.

2. The underachievement is symptomatic of a mismatch between the student and his or her school environment.

3. The underachievement results from a personal characteristic such as low self-motivation, low self-regulation, or low self-efficacy [11].

Here we focus on underachievement resulting from the personal characteristics of the student.

In each section below, we briefly review research on one of these achievement characteristics and suggest interventions to develop that characteristic in gifted students who are underachieving at college.

Self-Efficacy. Students develop confidence in many ways, and those who are confident about their skills are more likely to engage in a variety of activities. The perceptions students have about their skills influence the types of activities they select, how much they challenge themselves at those activities, and the persistence they exhibit once they are involved [5, 10]**.**

For those who suffer from low self-confidence, Siegle (1995) suggested the following strategies to increase self-efficacy. Students who have been successful in the past are more likely to believe they will be successful in the future. The adage "Success breeds success" generally holds true for self-efficacy. To develop self-efficacy in students, educators and parents can help them recognize their successes and growth in specific areas. Rewards can also increase students' self-efficacy when they are tied to specific accomplishments [10]. When teachers give students

opportunities to revise their work, they promote efficacious behavior. Students often view exams and projects as static portraits of their abilities at one point in time, instead of seeing the assignments as part of a learning process. Students need to appreciate that any project, no matter how well executed, can be enhanced with revisions and that a first attempt, even if fraught with errors, can be improved. Utilizing portfolios to preserve student work can be an effective way to document student growth and improvement over rime [10].

Teacher compliments should be specific to the skills students are acquiring. A specific compliment, such as, "You really know how to make up a dialogue," provides more information to a student than a general comment, such as, "Good job." Feedback linking successes with ability is more effective if the feedback is provided early in the students' performance [10]. Although feedback linking success to ability can increase self-efficacy, failures should never be attributed to lack of ability. When failure is attributed to lack of effort or poor choice of learning strategies, students are likely to put forth more effort the next time they engage in a similar task. By contrast, failure that is attributed to lack of ability decreases student motivation [6, 10]. when students perform poorly, educators can help them practice lack-of-effort or poor-strategy use explanations, while drawing attention to something they did correctly. For example, a comment like, "You know how to present a problem solving, but you need to be more careful at critical reading the research," provides both positive feedback and strategic guidance,

Teachers should also avoid the appearance of unsolicited help, expressions of sympathy following a substandard performance, or praise after an easy task. Students believe that these responses are indicative of low ability. Also, receiving praise for work completed without effort may cause students to doubt others' beliefs in their abilities. Gifted students who remain unchallenged in school and receive high praise for work that is easily accomplished may begin to doubt others' beliefs in their abilities. Similarly, doing the same task repeatedly does not maintain high self-efficacy [10]. Teachers must continually raise the academic hurdle for students who have shown mastery of specific skills or content. Again, gifted students are often repeatedly forced to show mastery of the same concepts and skills, and this constant repetition may sabotage a bright student's self-efficacy. Teachers who help promote self-efficacious learners consistently provide students with challenging assignments, offer specific praise for students' accomplishments, and grant opportunities for students to revise their work.

Environmental Perception. We hypothesize that students' perceptions of their environment play an important role in their achievement motivation. Students who view their environment as friendly and reinforcing may be more likely to demonstrate achievement-oriented behaviors. Students who expect that they will succeed within their environment may be more likely to put forth effort. Phrases such as, "My teacher doesn't like me," or, "I can't learn this way," may be indicators that students do not view their learning environment as friendly or that they have developed a belief that their efforts do not affect outcomes [3].

Gifted students, like other students, wish to "look good" and to avoid embarrassment in front of their peers. They often report that classroom teachers don't call on them when their hands are raised or embarrass them by calling on them when no one else knows the answer. From a teacher's perspective, the gifted child may

appear to be the most likely choice when no one else raises a hand; however, gifted students feel embarrassed when they are unable to answer correctly, and they may be teased if they constantly answer the most difficult questions correctly. A second area of concern is how teachers relate to gifted students in their classes. Rather than appreciating the special gifts and talents these students exhibit, some teachers are threatened by the presence of gifted students in their classroom. Therefore, in some situations, underachievement may represent a coping strategy whereby students strive to adapt to an anti-intellectual school environment.

Goals. Student's goals and achievement values affect their self-regulation and motivation [4] because goals influence how children approach, engage in, and respond to achievement tasks. When students value the goals of the school, they will be more likely to engage in academics, expend more effort on their school-work, and become achievers. Peterson (2000) followed achieving and underachieving gifted high school students into college and found that achievers' sureness and earlier determination of career direction suggested that direction may be a factor in successful achievement [8]. Emerick (1992) reported that underachieving high school gifted students were able to reverse the underachievement pattern by developing goals that were both personally motivating and directly related to academic success. Students' motivation to complete tasks stems from the attainment value, utility value, and intrinsic value associated with the task [7].

Attainment value is the importance students attach to the task as it relates to their conception of their identity and ideals. For example, students who identify themselves as athletes set goals related to their sport. These students are more motivated to attain the goals because they are associated with the students' perceptions **of** who they are. Providing students with role models who value academic achievement may be one way to increase attainment value.

Intrinsic value often results from the enjoyment an activity produces for the participant [11]. When students enjoy scholastic tasks, they are intrinsically motivated to do well. Both interests and personal relevance produce intrinsic value for a student. Students bring a variety of experiences and interests to the classroom, and learning becomes personally meaningful when their prior knowledge and diverse experiences are connected with the present learning experiences. Educators can aid this by creating an enriching environment and providing opportunities for students to explore their interests.

Self-Regulation. Self-regulation describes students' organization skills and attitude in executing tasks [12]. For self-regulation to occur, a student must have both choice and control. Often, gifted students are not given the control over their own learning that would enable them to demonstrate their capability for self-regulatory processes.

Assuming that students have the skills to do well and are motivated, they must set realistic expectations and implement appropriate management strategies. Gifted students' use of self-regulatory strategies varies considerably [4; 12]. Many gifted students are self-regulated learners; however, some gifted students exhibit low levels of self-regulatory strategy use. Research suggests that some gifted students are able to achieve at high levels without the use of self-regulatory strategies, although students who fail to develop appropriate strategies may be at risk for later underachievement (Ablard & Lipschultz). Because gifted students traditionally

progress through the early years **of** school without being challenged, they some-times fail to develop the self-management skills that other students master. In the early grades, good memory and fast processing skills can compensate for note taking and other study skills. Often, educators attempt to teach students study skills before students need those skills to be successful. This process usually frustrates both the teachers and the students. Self-regulatory skills are more likely to be internalized when they are needed to solve the problem at hand. An obvious solution to the problem is to provide gifted students with an academically challenging curriculum early and throughout their school careers.

Teachers can help students to develop self-regulatory skills by incorporating explicit strategies to teach and model those skills into their classrooms. Zimmerman, Bonner, and Kovatch (1996) have designed an instructional model for developing self-regulated learners that involves training in goal setting, strategy use, and self-monitoring [12]. In their learning academy model, students evaluate their current levels of mastery, analyze the learning task, set their own learning goals, choose the appropriate strategy to master material, and monitor their own performance. In summary, using programs to develop gifted students' self-regulatory skills will be more successful when the students can show mastery of prior learning and practice developing self-regulatory skills in the context of new learning.

Conclusion. No single intervention will work with all gifted underachievers. Just as gifted underachievers differ from gifted achievers, gifted underachievers differ from each other. Discovering how the personal factors discussed in this paper interact with each other and the extent to which they influence the achievement of gifted students will provide fertile areas for future research. Research and pedagogy within the fields of educational psychology and gifted education can enhance our efforts to create positive achievement environments for gifted students.

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