PAGE Handbook Series

The Handbook for Helping Underachieving Gifted Students

PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION FOR GIFTED EDUCATION

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Welcome to Parents, Teachers, and Administrators! Gifted students exhibit high performance capability intellectually, creatively, or artistically. They possess unusual leadership capability or excel in a specific academic field (Ross, 1994). But over the course of their education, up to 50% of gifted students may not achieve to their potential (Ford, 1996; Phillipson, 2008; Whitmore, 1980). Sadly, gifted high school students may drop out of school before graduation. Students with great potential should not be failing to reach their potential, nor should they leave school without developing that potential.

Helping each student flourish

There are approximately 58,000 gifted children in the state of Pennsylvania. The problem of underachievement within the gifted population has baffled educators, especially educators of the gifted (Ford, 1996; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Schultz, 2002; Whitmore, 1980). There is not an easy or quick way to fix the problem because gifted underachievement has many causal factors (Siegle, 2013).

This handbook has been created to help you understand the problem of underachievement, give common characteristics of underachievement, identify some of the causal factors of underachievement and give ideas and encouragement to reverse underachievement. It is our hope that this handbook will help each one of our gifted children reach their fullest potential!

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PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION FOR GIFTED EDUCATION

ADVOCATING FOR GIFTED EDUCATION SINCE 1952

Handbook for Helping Underachieving Gifted Students

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The Power of a Great Education

The Definitions of Underachievement

Is a gifted underachiever one who is having difficulties in school, or one who does not measure up to what teachers and parents expect? Is there more than one kind of underachiever? In gifted education, even experts in the field have not agreed on the exact definition of underachievement. Here are four definitions of gifted underachievement:

- Underachievers exhibit a severe discrepancy between expected achievement (as measured by standardized achievement tests, cognitive, intellectual ability tests) and actual achievement (as measured by class grades and teacher evaluations). The discrepancy must not be the direct result of a diagnosed learning disability and must persist over an extended period of time (Reis & McCoach, 2000).

- Gifted students who exhibit difficulties in school (Beckley, 1998).

- One who demonstrates remarkable strengths or talents in some areas but disabling weaknesses in others (Frey,2002).

- Delisle and Galbraith (2002) identify two types of underachievement among the gifted:

    - Underachievement, a learned set of behaviors.

    - Nonproduction, or "selective consumerism" (p. 167). A selective consumer is a student in touch with both self and the world of learning but unwilling to do work if there is no purpose to it (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002).

Common Characteristics of Underachieving Gifted Students

Despite the many factors causing underachievement, there are common characteristics of underachieving gifted students, including:

- low academic self-perception

- negative attitudes toward school, classes, and teachers

- low motivation

- low goal values

- lack of persistence

Causal Factors of Underachievement

As researchers have focused on identifying unique characteristics of the gifted underachiever, they have tried to isolate the causal factors and develop interventions for reversing the underachievement patterns (Emerick, 1992). Some of the more common factors are listed below. After each factor, a resource has been listed for you to explore further. This list is long, and we must remember that there might be more than one causal factor for underachievement. The good news for parents, teachers and administrators is that underachievement is a behavior, and as such, it can be changed (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002).

- Underachievement is attributed to learning disabilities (Beckley, 1998; Frey, 2002).
- Mismatch between the school setting and the students' needs (Matthews & McBee, 2007).
- Some gifted students will hide their superior ability because they want to fit in with their peers or because the teacher requires ***additional***, not replacement, work for the gifted (Grobman, 2006; Schultz, 2000).
- Exceptionally gifted students have powerful inner drives which they try to keep secret by denying or restricting them (Grobman, 2006).
- Perfectionism causes students to procrastinate or avoid accomplishing basic work (Rimm, 2007).
- Fine motor skill deficits and test anxiety can be causes of underachievement (Stoeger & Ziegler, 2013).
- Gifted students are often not challenged in the regular classroom (Cross, 2014). They appear to be doing fine but are not challenged by their teachers to reach their full potential (Winebrenner & Berger, 1994).
- Gifted students do not learn to develop important and complex academic study skills because they have not encountered complex tasks or learned to work (Hansen & Johnston-Toso, 2007; Rayneri et al., 2006; Reis et al., 1995; Ryan & Coneybeare, 2013; Winebrenner & Berger, 1994).
- Teachers are more willing to differentiate lessons for struggling students than for gifted students (Hanson & Johnston-Toso, 2007).
- Students already know the material and feel it is pointless to continue to do the work (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002).

Psychological, Motivational, & Non-Cognitive Factors for Underachievement

Psychological factors, also known as motivational or non-cognitive factors, can matter more than cognitive factors for student academic performance (Duckworth, 2013; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Dweck et al., 2011). Various terms fall into these categories, and a resource has been provided for you to further explore. We will take a closer look at the following:

- Self-Efficacy
- Low Resilience
- Fear of Failure
- Sabotaging Success
- The Label of Gifted
- Easy Early Success
- Lack of motivation and persistence

Self-Efficacy

Perceived self-efficacy, a person's belief about their capabilities to produce effects, regulates human functioning in motivation. Motivation increases if people believe they can reach their goals and adjust their progress, but students with low self-efficacy will shy away from difficult tasks, have low aspirations, low motivation and little commitment to their goals. Self-efficacy beliefs also establish perseverance and resilience as they face failure and setbacks (Bandura, 1994,1997).

Low Resilience

Resilience is adapting well when faced with adversity, trauma, stress and tragedy (American Psychological Association, 2015). High resilience comes with heightened academic success in the presence of personal vulnerabilities and adversities caused by the environment or experiences. This resilience is a continuous reaction to the environment, not just linked to one event (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997). Students who lack resilience fear failure, and may sabotage their success by procrastinating, waiting to study until the last minute, or not study to have an excuse if they do not do so well (Martin, 2002).

Fear of Failure and Sabotaging Success

Gifted students, especially those who are perfectionists, may worry that their grade may fall and not be good enough after past successes. When an assignment is given, they fail to turn in their work, or they procrastinate fearing a lower grade. Students also may not handle praise well and deliberately fail to avoid praise from peers (Schector, 2010).

The Label of Gifted

The label "gifted" may bring more harm than good for our gifted students. Students who have been given the label of "gifted" may think that since it was something given, perhaps it can be taken away. Several researchers are concerned that the label of gifted can be a curse when academic challenges arise. Gifted students have a "gift" or ability; thus, when facing a challenge, they may withdraw effort to reduce the risk of feeling "ungifted," especially if they do not know the material (Good, 2012; Aronson & Juarez, 2012).

Early Easy Success

The early easy successes gifted students have may undermine them when they face their first true challenges. Academic gifts are akin to a Trojan Horse, unleashing an army of self-doubt when success is tied to innate ability (Good 2012).

The Importance of Persistence in Achievement

Terman and Oden (1959) continued seminal research begun by Terman in 1921 to follow the development and characteristics of gifted children. One of the factors found to divide the successful gifted adults (those who made use of their intellectual ability), from the unsuccessful gifted adults (those who did not use their intellectual ability), was persistence (Terman & Oden, 1959). Lower levels of persistence may eventually result in underachievement (Stoeger & Ziegler, 2013).

In a more recent study by Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley (2006), there was a significant connection between students' academic averages and a persistent learning style, indicating that greater persistence was related to greater achievement. Lower persistence was also associated with lower achievement. "The difference, however, between gifted students who achieve in the school setting and those who do not seems to be directly related to persistence to stick with and complete assignments" (114). Middle school students were more likely to underachieve when they suspected they were no longer gifted. This led to a lack of confidence, which manifested itself in even lower effort levels, with the possible result of being removed from gifted academic classes.

More Connections to Underachievement

Each gifted student has hopes and dreams. When struggling with underachievement, students might not have the same opinion as their parents and teachers about the definition of underachievement, nor the characteristics. Additionally, the reasons for underachievement might be something totally unexpected, and not on the "list of typical factors" noted throughout research and this handbook. For example, students might be worried about parents, siblings, death, inability to control events out of their control, or even deportation. Subotnik (2012) notes that currently, it seems that to gain admiration in high school, brilliance must appear effortless. In other words, bright students must attend unchallenging classes, underachieve, and pretend not to work hard in order to be socially successful. For these reasons talking "heart-to-heart" with gifted children about their unhappiness, frustrations, and worries can help reveal the root of the problem. Teachers and parents should work together to help alleviate factors causing underachievement for students.

Mindset

This section is included in the handbook because the traits of the fixed mindset are very similar to traits exhibited by underachieving gifted students. Persistence, a hallmark of the growth mindset, may be one avenue toward reversing underachievement. We also know that persistence is needed to change, correct, and reverse underachievement.

So, what is a Mindset?

- Mindsets are implicit theories about intelligence or beliefs about the nature of ability. Is ability fixed? Is a person born with certain abilities that cannot be altered?
    - If students believe their intelligence is fixed (either you know it, or you don't), they adopt a **performance goal** to **document** their ability, avoiding challenges and exhibiting low persistence when faced with the possibility of not looking smart. These students have a "fixed" mindset.
    - However, if students believe their intelligence can grow with effort, they adopt a **learning goal**. They are willing to persist through obstacles and challenges, enjoying the challenge to learn and grow. These students have a "growth" mindset (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Mindsets and Goals

Students with a fixed mindset worry about proving their ability rather than improving their ability. In the face of a challenge, students begin to have destructive thoughts like, "I am dumb." Rather than look dumb, students will give up on the challenge. They believe it is important to look smart at all costs. Students will not want to take risks for fear of failing and not looking "smart." Students with a fixed mindset will turn away from learning, even when it is crucial to their future success (Dweck, 2012a, 2012b, Dweck, Walton & Cohen, 2011).

By contrast, students with a growth mindset perceive the same challenge or setback as an opportunity to learn. They respond with positive, constructive thoughts such as, "I need to put more effort into my work" or "I need to change my strategy." This mindset allows students to use failures as points of learning and transcend short-term setbacks to concentrate on long-term goals. For them, it is important to learn at all costs. Students will

remain engaged for the long haul and deploy new strategies for moving forward. The goals of the fixed mindset (the desire to look smart and not grow) are the exact opposite of the goals of the growth mindset (the desire to grow) (Dweck, 2012a, Dweck et al.,2011).

Relationship Between Mindset and Goals	
Fixed Mindset	**Growth Mindset**
Worry about proving ability	Need to put in effort
"I am dumb"	Concentrate on long-term goals
Give up on challenge	Desire to grow
Best to look smart at all cost	Learn at all cost

Mindsets and Effort

When a true academic challenge confronts gifted students for the first time, they can respond by either putting effort into solving the challenge or by giving up. Rather than putting effort into the work, students with a fixed mindset might choose to exert as little effort as possible. In their thinking, high effort must equal low ability. This is particularly difficult for students who have been given the label of "gifted," indicating something was given and perhaps could be taken away. These students worry about how much intelligence they truly have and prefer to do easy work to avoid mistakes (Good, 2012; Aronson & Juarez, 2012).

Students with a growth mindset focus on perseverance and self-improvement. They strive to improve their ability with effort and will forgo immediate pleasure for schoolwork. They view effort positively, and they will persist in completing difficult assignments (Dweck et al., 2011; Dweck, 2012a). Again, the two mindsets are in complete opposition to one another when comparing the effort put toward solving a problem.

Relationship Between Mindset and Effort	
Fixed Mindset	**Growth Mindset**
Effort = low ability	Focus on self-improvement
Exert as little effort as possible	Improve ability with effort
Fear not being "gifted"	Forgo pleasure for schoolwork

Mindsets and Persistence When Failing

Belief in their own ability is very important to students when they face a challenge. When students believe that their ability cannot change, they resist overcoming challenges. In addition to humiliation and shame, students with a fixed mindset feel a dark shadow over their ability, and their responses to failure can be debilitating. Some do not seek to repair the deficiency, believing the prime tenet of a fixed mindset: that their intelligence is fixed and cannot be altered. Students become discouraged and defensive when faced with a failure, blaming lack of ability or uncontrollable factors (Dweck, 1975, Dweck, 2012b, Grant & Dweck, 2003).

Gifted students with a growth mindset react to setbacks with resiliency, determination, and more effort. For them, a failure is an opportunity to learn or a problem to be solved. Students believe their brain can change and their ability can increase with effort (Blackwell et al., 2007). They are willing to stretch themselves beyond their comfort zone to learn new things and to work very hard to accomplish tasks, even after repeated failure. Students work to find the best way to learn material if the first tries fail (Dweck et al., 2011; Dweck, 2012b).

Relationship between Mindset and Failing	
Fixed Mindset	**Growth Mindset**
Humiliation and Shame	Opportunity to learn
Dark Shadow over ability	Love Challenges
Blame lack of ability on uncontrollable factors	Willing to stretch themselves and work harder to accomplish tasks

We hope this material about mindsets will help parents understand and identify a growth and fixed mindset. Then, if they experience the heartache of seeing their bright, enthusiastic child begin to underachieve, they can determine if their child has a growth or fixed mindset and offer help. They can communicate with their child to find other factors that might exacerbate underachievement. Parents can assure their child that failure can lead to more learning and can lead to success if approached as such. Learning about the growth mindset has helped students with motivation, persistence in the face of challenges, and ultimately achievement.

Administrators can also benefit from knowing about the growth mindset to encourage gifted students in their schools who are struggling with underachievement. When talking with underachieving gifted students, administrators can point out that the growth mindset allows students to use failures as springboards for learning and to transcend short-term setbacks by concentrating on long-term goals. The growth mindset can make a difference in the way students look at persistence when facing challenges and problems.

Conclusion

Please use and share the information in this handbook with parents, teachers, and administrators to help them with the problem of underachievement among our gifted children. Gifted students have so much talent and ability to share; it is imperative to help them achieve to their potential.

Definitions

- ***Fixed mindset*—**An implicit theory of intelligence that believes ability and intelligence are fixed and uncontrollable (Dweck, 2012b).

- ***Gifted Students*—** The definition for mentally gifted in Pennsylvania is, "outstanding intellectual and creative ability the development of which requires specially designed programs or support services, or both, not ordinarily provided in the regular education program" (Pennsylvania Code, 2008, §16.1, p. 1).

- ***Growth mindset*—**An implicit theory of intelligence that believes the brain is malleable and ability and intelligence can be developed with effort and learning (Dweck, 2012b).

- ***Mindset*—**A way of thinking: an attitude or set of opinions (Mindset, (n.d.) In this paper, growth and fixed mindsets focus on one's beliefs about intelligence (Dweck, 2012b).

- ***Persistence***—The quality that allows someone to continue doing something or trying to do something even though it is difficult or opposed by other people (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), specifically persistence after failure to overcome an obstacle, a problem, or a challenge.

- ***Resilience*—**Adapting well when faced with adversity, trauma, stress and tragedy (American Psychological Association, 2015).

- ***Self-efficacy*—**A person's belief about their capabilities to produce effects (Bandura, 1994).

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