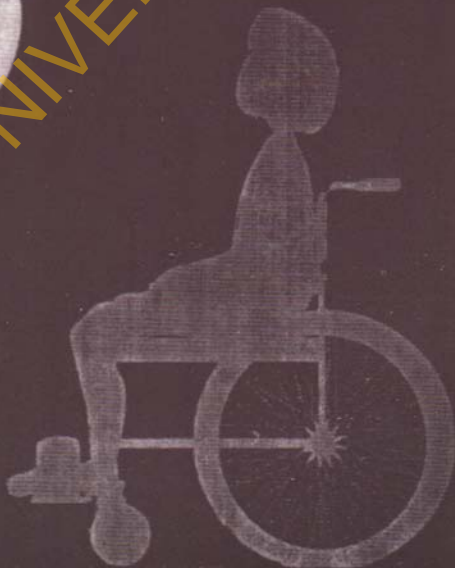


ISSN 0795-8730

Journal of Special Education

Vol. 13, No. 1, July, 2015



**Journal of the Department of
Special Education,
University of Ibadan**

Journal of
Special Education

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Journal of the Department of Special Education, University of Ibadan

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The role of Parenting Strategies in fostering the Performance of Underachieving gifted students

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Abstract

The process of defining underachievement, identifying underachieving gifted students, explaining the reasons for this underachievement and ways to eliminate underachievement of gifted children continues to stir controversy among practitioners, researchers, and clinicians. Despite this interest, the underachievement of gifted students remains an enigma. In this paper, effort has been made to state the concept of underachieving gifted students, characteristic of gifted underachievers and causes of underachievement among the gifted learners. Different strategies parents can use to prevent underachievement among their gifted children are stressed, conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made on how to find lasting solution to the problem of underachievement among the gifted learners. As part of the recommendations, parents are asked to be aware of their children's area of intense interests and build on these. They are to use success in an interest outside of school as an encouragement for success in school. Parents are to share their children's special interests with the teacher because the teacher would be able to use these to motivate the children. It is also recommended that parents should discover their children's academic weaknesses. Parents are to device ways to make learning fun in such areas. They are also to create a game or song that makes learning easier. Recommendation is also made that teachers should help gifted underachievers to identify their areas of strength. They are to notice these strengths and work to enhance them.

Keyword: Parenting strategies, Underachieving gifted students, Academic performance

Introduction

For years, the underachievement of gifted students had troubled both parents and educators. Too often, students who show great academic potential fail to perform at a level commensurate with their abilities. Some underachieving students may lack self-efficacy, goal-directedness, or self-regulation skills (Siegle & McCoach, 2001); other low achievers may suffer from either obvious or hidden disabilities. Still others may

underachieve in response to inappropriate educational conditions or environments. Underachievement can occur at any level of intellectual ability. Some underachievers are gifted, with superior intellectual ability and special talents. Others have mild to severe learning problems that are compounded by their lack of effort in the classroom (Rathvon, 2006).

Underachievers' true abilities may be masked by their underachievement. Consistently poor performance can seduce both parents and teachers into believing that the current level of performance is an accurate reflection of children's abilities and skill levels.

Parents sometimes think that their children's problems will be outgrown. It has been observed that there is no silver bullet to enhance the performance of underachieving gifted students: however, parents can use certain strategies to create an environment in which their children feel confident about themselves and value achievement. By helping them realise that they have a role in their own talent development, parents can promote their children's motivation and self-determination. At this juncture, it is highly essential to examine the concept of gifted underachievement.

Defining gifted underachievement should be a fairly straight forward task. Unfortunately, just as there is no universally accepted definition of gifted and talented learners, no universal definition of gifted underachievement currently exist. Students identified as gifted and talented learners are not a homogenous group. Several researchers who have studied gifted and talented learners agree that "there is no one portrait of a gifted student. Talents and strengths among the gifted vary as widely as they do with any sample of students drawn from a so-called average population" (Schmitz & Gabraith, 1985). The most common component of the various definitions of gifted underachievement involves identifying a discrepancy between ability and achievement (Baum, Renzulli, & Hebert, 1995; Supplee, 1990; Whitmore, 1980). Clark (1983) also defined gifted underachievers as those who have shown exceptional performance on a measure of intelligence but who, nevertheless, do not perform as well as expected for students of the same age on school related tasks. Having explained the meaning and concept of gifted underachievement, it is however essential to establish the need for the study.

Justification for the Study

The underachieving gifted student 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 particularly the parents. Parents' intervention would be very effective because they are the closest set of people to the underachieving gifted students and the family happen to be the first institution such children are exposed to after birth (Ford, 2006). Children generally have implicit trust in their parents and believe that whatever direction they ask them to go must be the right path. All efforts must therefore be made for the parents to understand that in order to find lasting solution to the problem of underachievement among the gifted learners, they have an enormous role to play. They have to motivate their underachieving gifted children until they become achievers.

In order to realise the aforementioned goal, the parents must compulsorily take certain steps (Ford, 2006): First, they should not overload their underachieving children with activities. Some students are underachievers simply because they have too much to do and too many demands on their time. One or two extra-curricular activities a week are enough for most children. The second step is that parents must set aside a "Study Time" in their homes every night. No activities other than studying are allowed during study time. Parents are to be lifelong learners themselves and should model good studying behaviour during Study Time. Moreover, with the classroom teacher, parents must devise a system of parent-teacher communication. They should take advantage of new technologies. They are to use e-mail, school or teacher's websites, homework hotlines and other forms of communication when available. They should not hesitate to contact the teacher. It is much better to work on a problem together with the teacher than for each of them to struggle with it on their own. Therefore, the need for the study is to educate the parents on the role they can play in the enhancement of the academic performance of underachieving gifted students in Oyo State.

It is believed that if all the aforementioned steps and many more are taken by the parents, the problems the underachieving gifted students are facing in their academics will become a thing of the past.

Characteristics of Gifted Underachievers

The characteristics of underachieving gifted students were stressed by some scholars namely: (Van Tassel-Baska, 2002; Whitmore, 2006; Rimm, 2006; Baum, Owen & Dixon, 2001). They are of the opinion that underachieving gifted students are always people with low self-esteem, people who consistently show negative attitude toward school and learning and are always reluctant to take risks. They show discomfort with competition and lack perseverance and goal directed behaviour.

Underachieving gifted students are also said to be socially isolated, weak in skill areas and organisation and resistant to class activities. They have weak motivation for academic achievement and tend to have poor study habits. They do less homework, frequently nap when trying to study, and leave more of their work incomplete. They are often less matured than achievers, lack self-discipline, procrastinate, show unwillingness to complete tasks deemed unpleasant, have high distractibility, and are always unwilling to face unpleasant realities. They often show poor personal adjustment and express feelings of being restricted in their actions.

Causes of Underachievement in Gifted Students

Determining why some high ability students demonstrate low levels of achievement is difficult because underachievement occurs for many different reasons. However, practitioners must explore the causes of students' underachievement if they wish to help these children. It is believed that in the vast majority of cases, the underachievement of bright students occurs for one of the following three basic reasons.

First, an apparent underachievement problem masks more serious physical, cognitive, or emotional issues. Second, the underachievement is symptomatic of a mismatch between the

student and his or her school environment (Siegle & amp McCoach, 2001). Third, underachievement results from a personal characteristics such as low self-motivation, low self-regulation, or low self-efficacy (Ries & McCoach, 2010).

Each of these causes for underachievement may require a different intervention. Therefore, educators should attempt to isolate the reason for students behaviours before attempting to reverse the underachievement. Some other researchers also recognise that underachievement is a diverse phenomenon with a variety of determinants. For example Whitmore (1989) identified three broad causes for underachievement in gifted children: first among them is lack of motivation to apply themselves in school followed by the environments that do not nurture their gifts and may even discourage high achievement. The last one is the disabilities or other learning deficits that mask their giftedness.

Children in all the above three categories tell a similar story. All manifest a discrepancy between potential and achievement in school. Despite the uniqueness of each individual, a significant number of underachievers respond to similar challenges in more or less similar ways.

How Parents can Prevent Underachievement in Gifted Students

Parents can help to ameliorate the problem of underachievement among their gifted children and make school meaningful to them in certain ways stated below (Siegle, 2006). The first way of doing this is by modeling their own curiosity about the world around them. However, parents must demonstrate how curiosity is transformed into action. Parents could also achieve this by nurturing their children's curiosity and love of learning through opportunities outside school that help them explore their interests. One other way is by letting their children know that they value school and showing them how their school experiences are important now and will prove useful in the future. Moreover, parents are to monitor their children's homework, which again sends the message that parents value what their children do in school. Again, parents could prevent underachievement by sharing their children's interests with the school and working with the school and their children to tie these interests to school projects.

In addition to valuing school, motivated students believe that they have the skills to do well in school. It is imperative also that children recognise their own role in developing these skills. Students who believe that their abilities are not innate but have been developed are more likely to attempt challenging tasks. Gifted students are at risk for believing that their abilities are simply given, particularly if others in their lives have not discussed their giftedness with them.

Siegle (2006) went further to say that parents can try the following approaches:

- i. They can talk about their children's giftedness with them by helping them recognise that they are continually changing and growing and that they have a hand in their own accomplishments and growth.
- ii. Parents can document their children's growth by saving their schoolwork or videotaping them performing various tasks and sharing these items with them later. The

children will be impressed with how much progress they have made. Another way of going about it is by helping them to understand that challenging situations are opportunities to acquire or improve skills and that encountering difficulty does not mean that they are not intelligent. The children could also be helped by recognising the part that effort has played in their growth by complimenting them with specific examples.

- iii. Parents should also talk about their daily lives and emphasise how their own efforts lead to benefits. Parents who only complain that their supervisors do not appreciate them may send their children the message that putting forth effort is a waste of time. It is important for parents to share their positive work experiences as well as how they persist in spite of the inevitable negative aspects of the work world. Individuals who struggle but succeed build confidence in themselves; they also offer others a better lesson in how success is usually won than those who simply glide to it.

Students must expect to succeed and know that those around them will support their work. They must learn to trust that their efforts, even if momentarily thwarted, will pay off in the end. To help their children gain this trust, parents can do the following:

- i. Create opportunities for their children to interact with role models. Students' expectations are based on the experiences of their parents and role models.
- ii. Discuss cause-and-effect relationships with their children. In particular, parents can counsel children faced with difficult situations on how to change the environment to fit their needs, how to achieve success by adjusting to the existing environment, or when to let go of a fruitless idea or hopeless situation.

In addition to the aforementioned points, parents can as well take the following steps in order to solve the problem of underachievement among the gifted learners.

Examine the Problem Individually: Underachievement covers a broad spectrum of situations from a minor school problem with a fairly obvious cause to a more entrenched long-term pattern. Since underachievement is such a varied and complex phenomenon, parents must ensure that each case is examined individually –with no preconceptions. As Hansford (2001) observes: “Underachievement is very specific to the individual child; intervention and remediation of underachievement must be individually developed and implemented”.

Create a Teacher – Parent Collaboration: Parents and teachers need to work together and pool their information and experience regarding the child. Most interventions in the literature involve parent-teacher collaborations (for example, Rimm, 2001), where they can coordinate their efforts and help the child progress more effectively. Some of the questions teachers and parents can explore together are:

- a. In what areas has the child shown exceptional ability?
- b. What are the child's preferred learning styles?

- c. What insights do parents and teachers have about the child's strength and problem areas?
- d. What does the child say about self-needs, interests, and school experiences, and how is this information to be interpreted?

This kind of joint exploration yields useful insight into the nature of the child's abilities and the root of the problem.

Stay focused on the Child's Gifts: When examining a child's underachievement, always begin by focusing on strengths; a deficiency approach encourages the child to focus on weaknesses even more than before. At each point the investigation needs to find the most effective ways to involve the child in the pursuit and exploration of personal talents and interests. This builds the confidence and strength the child needs to manage problem areas.

Create an individual Plan for the Child: The plan designed for the child has to emerge from the nature of individual gifts and the root causes of the underachievement. An underachieving Native American child, for example, who suffers from low skill development due to poverty, inadequate schooling, and low self-esteem needs an individualised programme that will provide mentoring in the development of personal gifts, open-ended projects that allow free exploration and divergent thinking, and also special intervention to strengthen skills (Scruggs & Cohn, 2003). Research on culturally different and disadvantaged gifted students has produced a number of effective models (Smutny, 2001) that educators can use to help reverse underachievement. These models show how factors such as cultural difference and impoverishment lead to underachievement and the kinds of interventions children need to overcome the barriers that have isolated them from their own talents.

Conclusion

Underachievers are a very heterogeneous group. Like gifted students in general, they exhibit great variability and diversity in their behaviours, interest, and abilities. Because students underachieve for so many different reasons, no one intervention strategy can possibly reverse these behaviours in all underachieving gifted students. We need to individualise programmes for underachieving gifted students at least as much as we individualise programmes for achieving gifted students. The most successful programme to reverse underachievement behaviours will provide a menu of intervention options for different types of underachieving gifted students. These menus should include curricular modification and differentiation options such as curriculum compacting, counselling components, and self-regulation training activities (Reis, McCoach, 2010).

Educators must also realise that home, peer and cultural environments may impact students' level of achievement. Educators must explore the various reasons for high ability students' underachievement if they hope to help combat underachievement. Practitioners should try to determine whether a student's underachievement stems from more serious physical, cognitive or emotional issues, a mismatch between the student and his or her school environment or a personal characteristics such as low self-efficacy. Then, educators should develop appropriate intervention strategies that address the specific area of need exhibited by the student in question. When we differentiate treatments to meet the needs of

underachievers, we will more effectively combat the problem of underachievement within our schools.

Recommendations

The underachievement of gifted children should be an area of concern for both parents and teachers. As opined by Adelodun (2015) it is the joint efforts of both parents and teachers that can put lasting solution to the problem of underachievement among the gifted students. For this reason, the researcher therefore consider it absolutely necessary to make the following recommendations for both parents and teachers.

Parents should be aware of their children's areas of intense interest and build on these. They must always use success in an interest outside of school as an encouragement for success in school. They must always share their children's special interest with the teacher. Also, parents are to promote a love of reading in their homes. They should designate one night a week as "No Television Night" and have a reading night instead. They should make the most inviting place in their homes a "Reading Area" where the only thing that can be done there is reading.

Parents are also to encourage their children to teach their younger ones those things they know. They are also encouraged to find older children or mentors to work with their children in areas of interest or in difficult subjects. It is also recommended for teachers to always emphasise goal setting, showing students how life success is linked to school performance. Teachers are to invite their former students to talk to their classes about the value of school in terms of success outside of school. E-mail interviews are also a good way to link students to the outside world.

It is also recommended for teachers to help underachievers identify their areas of strength. Most underachievers are painfully aware of their weaknesses, but every underachiever has many strengths as well. Teachers are to notice these strengths and work to enhance them. Finally, teachers must ensure that their lessons give the opportunity for students to use higher level thinking skills. Underachievers are often bored with low level thinking yet may be great problem solvers when given more complex and challenging problems.

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