



## 4: UNDERACHIEVEMENT

**What do we mean by underachievement?**

**When looking at the question of underachievement in school, first ensure that you and your colleagues are agreed on a definition.**

This launch pad includes sections on:

- ◆ Definitions
- ◆ Why underachievement is an important focus in the education of gifted and talented pupils
- ◆ The key issues to consider
- ◆ What you might do at school level
- ◆ Recommended reading

You may wish to read the text selectively.

### INTRODUCTION

Underachievement can be defined as an inability or failure to perform in accord with one's age or talents; in other words, unfulfilled potential. Given this definition, however, it can clearly be extremely hard to identify underachievers, and to note when underachievement is taking place.

Standardised tests, such as Cognitive Ability Tests and IQ-type tests, can be of some help in some subjects, when their results are compared with those of classroom-based assessment tasks and work. However, if pupils are not fully engaged when taking the tests, the results will not necessarily highlight their potential. Moreover, IQ is no longer considered an adequate indicator of potential ability in all areas. What is more likely to identify underachievement on a realistic scale is a wider spread and more varied mix of methods. There should be multiple criteria, and they should include teachers' own judgements, especially if these are exercised after staff have had training on assessing and identifying pupils' abilities. It goes without saying, though, that teachers need to beware of bias in their own attitudes when they are assessing potential, for example preconceptions based on the pupil's behaviour.

The characteristics of underachievement may vary considerably from one pupil to another. A comprehensive model has not yet been devised which can organise educationists' current understanding of underachievement. Until one is produced, a 'characteristics checklist' may be especially useful. Montgomery (1996) suggests that the presence in a pupil of five or more of the following indicators should lead teachers to suspect underfunctioning:

- "inconsistent pattern of achievement in schoolwork subjects
- inconsistent pattern of achievements within a subject area
- discrepancy between ability and achievements, with ability much higher
- lack of concentration
- daydreaming
- clowning and other work-avoidance strategies
- poor study skills
- poor study habits
- non-completion or avoidance of assignments
- refusal to write anything down
- overactivity and restlessness
- overassertive and aggressive or oversubmissive and timid social behaviour
- inability to form and maintain social relationships with peers
- inability to deal with failures
- avoidance of success
- lack of insight about self and others
- poor literacy skills
- endless talking, avoiding doing
- membership of stereotyped 'minority' group (not caucasian, male, middle-class)".

### WHY IS UNDERACHIEVEMENT AN IMPORTANT FOCUS IN THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS?

- Current definitions of high ability emphasise the importance of assessing the *potential* of the individual. Teachers are urged to identify pupils with the potential to achieve, not just with achieved potential. Such a model of ability highlights the fact that there may be significant numbers of pupils for whom there are discrepancies between their potential and their predicted performance. If schools are to be accountable for their success in educating the more able, they must address such discrepancies in these pupils, as in the case of all other pupils.
- Many teachers still find it difficult to identify able pupils, and may feel more confident in identifying the *less* able, including less able underachievers. Underachieving *able* pupils may thus be especially at risk of being overlooked, and of receiving inadequate provision.
- In many schools, classrooms, and peer groups, the prevailing social climate does not accept or value high achievement in all areas of the curriculum to the same extent. That climate will be particularly oppressive for those who are exceptionally able in some areas, and it may discourage high performance. In other words, it could be

argued that external pressures on the highly able to underachieve could be even higher than on their less able peers.

- Research in the USA indicates that ‘culturally different’ and ‘disadvantaged’ groups are present in comparatively limited numbers in ‘gifted’ programmes in American schools (Montgomery, 1996). It is likely that there is a similar pattern in the UK. Research continues into whether certain culturally different or disadvantaged groups have lower ratios of highly able pupils within them, though it is not proving easy. In the meantime, schools need to fulfil the spirit of their equal opportunities policies by investigating the extent to which such groups contain able pupils who are underachieving.

### WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

- If it is to tackle the problem of underachievement in more able pupils, a school will need a clear understanding of how to assess and identify their potential, as well their existing levels of achievement.
- Butler-Por (1987) argues that, in the main, underachievement is caused not by inability to do better but by either a conscious or an unconscious choice. Research, for example that of McClelland, Yewchuk and Mulcahy (1993), has shown that there are two main sets of factors affecting the performance of able underachievers. These are emotional and motivational factors, and factors concerned with strategies for learning. The researchers believe that when factors from the two sets are combined and interact, they seem to have the powerful consequence of preventing able pupils from becoming high achievers.
- Emotional and motivational factors include the possibility that pupils:
  - may be unaware of their own potential: they may lack insight about themselves and others (Butler-Por, 1987)
  - may have expectations that are ‘too low and too limited, or too narrow and too stereotypic’ (Montgomery, 1996); Butler-Por (1987) suggests that this factor can manifest itself as a lack of clear personal goals and values
  - may have a sense of inadequacy and low self-esteem; indeed, they may be vulnerable to disparagement by others (Butler-Por, 1987)
  - may have experienced ‘a high incidence of emotional difficulties’ (Kellmer Pringle, 1970), and/or be prone to depression and anxiety (Butler-Por, 1987)
  - may be unmotivated to achieve in school, despite a high self-concept (Montgomery, 1996)
  - may have a fear of failure (Montgomery, 1996)
  - may have a fear of success (Montgomery, 1996)
  - may have a habit of blaming others and ‘acts of chance’ (Montgomery, 1996).

Research also shows that once pupils who exhibit such tendencies do underachieve, these tendencies can become self-fulfilling and perpetuate the pattern of underachievement. An individual who is unaware of his/her own potential may become merely depressed by remarks such as ‘You could do better’, ‘You need to pull your socks up’, and may continue to underfunction. Freeman (1991) reported that pupils identified as ‘gifted’ feared they might be unworthy of the title. They therefore avoided

any challenge in case they were found wanting, explaining their failures away by claiming that they did not mind or had found tasks uninteresting. The result was that they fell further and further behind in school, only succeeding in tests that did not require any previous knowledge and thus failing to fulfil their 'early promise'.

Butler-Por (1987) shows that some emotional and motivational factors can stem from the influence of family and family background:

- "hostility in family relations
- rejection of the value of that member of the family, (i.e. the child)
- [unreasoning and excessive] parental expectations
- lack of support for emotional and social development and stability
- lack of interest in the child".

Other factors that should be added include:

- the background of a family, namely cultural, social or religious, with different values or goals from those predominant at school
- the influence of a school and/or peer group ethos which does not value high achievement, or does not value it uniformly or consistently (e.g. in sport, but not in science)
- a conflict between the goals stated by school and the personal hopes and dreams of the child.

➤ Factors connected with learning include the possibility that pupils:

- may have specific learning disabilities or difficulties, e.g. developmental dysphasia, developmental dyslexia, etc. (Montgomery, 1996)
- may have sensory and/or physical impairments (Montgomery, 1996)
- may not perform well in test situations (McClelland, Yewchuk and Mulcahy, 1993)
- 'may achieve below expectation in one or all of the basic skill areas: reading, language arts, mathematics' (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may submit work that is often unfinished or poorly done (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may have poor study skills
- may have poor work habits
- may avoid trying new activities (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may show tendencies to perfectionism and self-criticism (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may have difficulty in functioning in a group (of any size) (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may set goals unrealistically, too high or too low (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may dislike practice or drill work, memorisation and mastery (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may find it hard to focus attention and concentrate on tasks (McClelland et al., 1993)
- may have difficulty in making and maintaining peer relationships and friendships (McClelland et al., 1993).

➤ There is a further important factor in underachievement: that of the influence of teachers. Kellmer Pringle (1970) found that it was teachers themselves who exert the strongest and most lasting influence through their personalities – particularly on able underachievers who lack appropriate role models at home. Kellmer Pringle argues that effective teachers can improve pupils' self-concept and morale. They can

offer targeted support, and give the pupils opportunities to work independently and to rediscover their enjoyment of learning and their commitment to it.. Butler-Por, too (1987), found that identifying pupils with common difficulties, and giving them intensive and sympathetic help, enabled them to understand the problems that held them back and then to make notable progress. It follows then, conversely, that negative attitudes to underachievers are only likely to reinforce patterns of underachievement. The same is true if the teacher spends less time with them, or stereotypes them as 'less able', or if the pupils belong to certain groups of whom teachers might have lower expectations or ask less.

- Tackling underachievement is not just a matter of improving school performance or of tackling pupils' problems with learning. There is a vital pastoral aspect, as those who underachieve often have problems with motivation, socialisation and/or self-image. The pastoral responsibility should be a joint responsibility, to be shouldered by all, from whole school level downwards. It should be shared by senior and middle management in school, individual teachers, other supporting adults, and pupils' parents and families. There are many facets to this responsibility, amongst which are the following: ensuring that school policy documents are written sensitively, making as effective as possible such systems and procedures as adult support in school, and building productive home-school relationships.

#### WHAT MIGHT WE DO AT SCHOOL LEVEL?

- Ensure that you have effective assessment and identification procedures in place, and only then collect data on the extent of underachievement amongst pupils. Teare (1997) suggests using an Underachieving Pupil Referral Sheet, and outlines a possible format. Where possible, draw on several sources and kinds of information, including judgements by teachers, perhaps using the 'characteristics checklist' above; don't rely on formal or IQ-type tests alone.
- Collate and analyse information on the predominant factors common to groups of underachieving pupils, e.g. whether these are emotional and motivational factors, or connected with learning, or a combination of both. More detailed investigation may be warranted in the case of some distinctive groups where underachievement is suspected, e.g. cultural minority groups, or girls or boys in certain subjects.
- If peer or family pressure is an issue which is leading to underachievement it should be addressed aggressively but sensitively across the school and/or wider school community. Teare (1997) makes a number of practical suggestions, e.g.:
  - Make it clear throughout the school that pupils progress at different rates
  - Display catchphrases and key messages celebrating motivation and achievement
  - Promote at least some enrichment and extension activities that give pupils of all abilities opportunities to achieve, and ensure that pupils of sufficient maturity are aware of the philosophy behind this practice.
  - Write, and display widely, a code of achievement, and make reference to it in the course of lessons
  - Recognise the achievements of all pupils in all areas of school life, e.g. by celebrating these in assemblies.

Ensure that parents and families are informed about such initiatives, and fully involved in them.

- If emotional and motivational factors are an issue, e.g. personality or social problems, McClelland, Yewchuk and Mulcahy (1993), stress the importance of such adult support as mentoring or counselling. This support should, of course, be sympathetic, sensitive and systematic, and may require professional help from outside school. Some schools target groups of pupils who are achieving well but whom teachers feel are particularly vulnerable to peer group pressure, e.g. Year 6 boys who show ability in literacy. Remember that effective and systematic pastoral care can benefit all, the achieving and the underachieving alike. It may include helping financially disadvantaged pupils to take part in enrichment activities. It may also entail giving support with homework, or providing facilities for those who have limited space or privacy to work at home.
- If learning factors are an issue, targeted support from teachers may help to tackle specific problems. For example, there might be a special focus on study skills and efficient work habits, or intensive help with test performance or with techniques for improving concentration, group collaboration, and the completing of work. Liaise with appropriate professionals to provide support for those with specific learning difficulties, sensory or physical impairments, etc.
- Use models for enrichment and extension programmes in school, such as that of Renzulli and Reis (1993). This is an inclusive one, accommodating pupils with potential, not just 'able achievers', and if put into practice effectively it can be highly motivating.
- Ensure that your school has an ongoing cycle of training and discussion for identifying and providing for underachieving pupils. Such a process could form part of your cyclical procedures for identifying able pupils. Discussions should include the need for a spirit of mutual respect and dignity and joint exploration when working with able pupils, including underachievers, and for a recognition of the needs of the 'whole child'. Teare (1997) suggests that teachers may need to debate such matters as the relative weighting they give to pupils' and parents' motivation. They may also need to consider what limits should be set on the amount of challenge offered to pupils, for example if too much stress or exertion might have harmful effects.

### RECOMMENDED READING

Bleach, K., ed., 1998. *Raising Boys' Achievement in Schools*. Oakhill: Trentham Books.

Butler-Por, N., 1987 (out of print). *Underachievers in School: Issues and intervention*. Chichester: Wiley.

Cox, T., ed., 2000. *Combating Educational Disadvantage: Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable Pupils*. London: Falmer Press.

Freeman, J., 1991. *Gifted Pupils Growing Up*. London: Cassell.

Kellmer Pringle, M.L., 1970. *Able Misfits: The educational and behavioural difficulties of intelligent pupils*. London: Longman.

McClelland, R., Yewchuk, C. and Mulcahy, R., 1993. Motivation and strategy factors in gifted underachievement. *In: Wallace, B. and Adams, H.B. Worldwide Perspectives on the Gifted Disadvantaged*. Bicester: A B Academic Publishers.

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Pickering, J., 1997. *Raising Boys' Achievement*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

Renzulli, J.S. and Reis, S.M., 1993. Using the schoolwide enrichment triad model to provide programs for underserved gifted and talented students. *In: Wallace, B. and Adams, H.B., ed. Worldwide Perspectives on the Gifted Disadvantaged*. Bicester: A B Academic Publishers.

Teare, J.B., 1997. *Effective Provision for Able and Talented Children*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

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