



## UNDERACHIEVEMENT

**What do we mean by underachievement?**

**When considering the issue of underachievement in your school, first ensure that colleagues are agreed on a definition.**

### INTRODUCTION

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

One approach is to compare the results of tests such as Cognitive Ability and IQ-type tests (if these are available) with those of classroom-based assessment tasks and the student's general work. However, if students do not take the tests seriously or do not engage with them, such tests will not necessarily highlight potential. Moreover, IQ is no longer considered an adequate indicator of potential ability in all areas, and not every student of high ability 'tests well' in any case. In assessing the worth of such tests, it is worth remembering that they rarely deliver 'false positives' (which is why they are sometimes effective in highlighting underachievement), but that they can result in 'false negatives'.

A better approach to identifying underachievement is to employ a wider and more varied mix of methods. These should include multiple criteria, including teachers' own judgements, especially if staff have received training in assessing and identifying pupils' abilities. It goes without saying that teachers should beware of bias in their own attitudes when assessing potential, for example being influenced by pupils' behaviour. They need also to be aware of the difficulty of making holistic judgements about students if assessment is fragmented between subject departments.

Expectations, and how they are transmitted, are a vital factor. So is the teacher's response to what the students produce. Various studies have shown that what students are told about themselves and their work, and the way in which teachers give feedback, have significant effects on students' progress. Stoll and MacBeath (2005) remark, 'The message from these studies is that teachers can be surprised into higher expectations

given evidence of what their pupils can achieve when provided with appropriate stimulus or 'scaffolding' (Vygotsky, 1978). However, a deeper shift in belief systems about 'ability' and 'potential' is likely to take longer.'

Underachievers are not a uniform group, and they may exhibit a variety of characteristics. A comprehensive model has not yet been devised that can organise educationists' current understanding of underachievement. Until that is achieved, checklists of characteristics may be especially useful. Montgomery (1996) suggests that the presence of five or more of the following indicators should lead teachers to suspect that a student is '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
- over-activity and restlessness
- overassertive and aggressive or over-submissive 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 students with the potential to achieve, not just those students who *have* achieved. Such a model highlights the fact that there may be significant numbers of pupils for whom there are discrepancies between potential and predicted performance. If schools are to be accountable for their success in educating the more able, they must look into such discrepancies in depth.

Many teachers still find it difficult to identify able students, 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 not being adequately provided for.

In many schools, classrooms, and peer groups, the prevailing social climate does not accept or value high achievement in all areas of the curriculum. This climate can be extremely oppressive for able students, and may well create powerful disincentives to

high performance. Indeed, it could be argued that external pressures on able students to underachieve may be even stronger than those on their less able peers.

Research in the USA indicates that gifted education programmes in American schools include disproportionately small numbers of students from 'culturally different' and 'disadvantaged' groups (Montgomery 1996; Ford and Harris 1999). A similar pattern has been discovered in the operations of Excellence in Cities Gifted and Talented programmes in England, where 'white pupils were identified as 'gifted and talented' at more than twice the rate of Black Caribbean children and five times the rate for their Black African peers.' (Gillborn 2006; see also DfES 2005). Schools must continue to make every effort to fulfil the spirit of their equal opportunities policies by investigating the underachieving able in such groups in particular. The same effort be needed in relation to highly able female or male students in subjects that were once considered 'unusual' for their gender.

### WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

A school needs to reach a shared understanding and agreement on how to assess and identify the potential, as well as the achievement, of more able pupils. Until this happens it will not be able to tackle their problems of underachievement.

Butler-Por (1987) argues that underachievement is not caused in the main 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 (a) emotional and motivational factors, and (b) factors concerned with strategies for learning. McClelland et al believe that when factors from the two sets are combined and interact they seem to have the powerful consequence of preventing able students from becoming high achievers.

#### Emotional and motivational factors

These include the possibility that students:

- 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 shows that once students who exhibit such tendencies do underachieve, these tendencies can become self-fulfilling and perpetuate the pattern of underachievement. An individual who is unaware of her or his own potential may

become merely depressed by remarks such as ‘You could do better’, ‘You need to pull your socks up’, etc., and may thus continue to underperform. Freeman (1991) commented on the way in which students identified as ‘gifted’ feared they might be unworthy of the title. They reacted by avoiding any challenge in case they were found wanting, explaining their failures away by claiming that they did not mind or had found tasks uninteresting. As a result, they fell further and further behind in school, succeeding only on tests that did not require any previous knowledge, and thus failed to fulfil their ‘early promise’.

Butler-Por (1987) points out 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 pupil]
- [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, or a cultural, social or religious group, 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. esteemed for rugby, but not for physics)
- a conflict between the goals stated by school and the personal goals of the individual.

An interesting discussion of motivation occurs in a chapter by Hillson in ‘Soaring High! The Essex High Expectations Project’ (2004), where he refers to the effect of ‘affluent’ home circumstances on the motivation of some students. He notes, ‘This can easily translate into a scenario where the ‘effort’ and ‘determination’ qualities are left unused. The perception that there will be something at the end of the line, no matter what, can grow. It is this culture that can clearly be seen in many of the pupils in the school.’ In a different context, Arnold (1997) made a similar point about the possible effects of complacency on motivation. Reviewing the research on underachievement in boys, he wrote, ‘Paradoxically, it is the experience of many observers that far from suffering a sense of hopelessness, boys tend to complacency and an overestimate of their abilities and prospects.’ One study he cites is that of Balding (1994), who carried out research among 30,000 teenagers and wrote: ‘It shows boys have not sunk into gloom at the sight of girls’ educational advance. Although fewer of them expect to continue in education, they are more confident than girls that they will have a worthwhile career and find a job.’

### **Factors connected with the quality of learning**

McClelland, Yewchuk and Mulcahy (1993) list a number of indicators, pointing out that students

- may not perform well in test situations
- ‘may achieve below expectation in one or all of the basic skill areas: reading, language arts, mathematics’
- may submit work that is often unfinished or poorly done
- may avoid trying new activities
- may show tendencies to perfectionism and self-criticism

- may have difficulty functioning in a group (of any size)
- may set goals unrealistically, either too high or too low
- may dislike practice or drill work, memorisation and mastery
- may find it hard to focus attention and concentrate on tasks
- may have difficulty in making and maintaining peer relationships and friendships).

And there is, of course, the possibility that a student may have:

- specific learning disabilities or difficulties, e.g. developmental dysphasia, developmental dyslexia, or
- sensory and/or physical impairments (Montgomery 1996).

To these we may add the effect upon motivation, and thereby achievement, of boredom with work that is undemanding or has been met before (Kanevsky and Keighley 2003). Pupils can sometimes be disappointed to find that they are repeating work they have done in their earlier school, when they were expecting new knowledge and new teaching. They may feel that the work underestimates what they are capable of doing, and the school may have 'organisational structures that give pupils a negative sense of themselves as learners.' In 2002, research for Ofsted indicated that secondary schools tended not to build effectively on the work pupils did in primary school. In recent years, however, there has been much work devoted to continuity of learning at points of transition, and Arnold (2002) gives detailed analyses of good practice in a number of local authorities.

A crucial factor in overcoming underachievement is the influence of teachers. Kellmer Pringle (1970) found that it was teachers themselves who exert the strongest and most lasting influence – particularly on able underachievers who lack appropriate role models at home. Effective teachers can improve pupils' self-concept and morale, offer targeted support, and give pupils opportunities to work independently and to rediscover the excitement of learning. Butler-Por (1987) found that identifying pupils with common difficulties, and giving them intensive and sympathetic support, enabled them to understand the problems that held them back and to make notable progress. Conversely, where a teacher has a negative attitude to underachievers, or spends less time with them, the effect will be to reinforce patterns of underachievement.

Tackling underachievement is not just a matter of improving school performance or of addressing students' problems with learning strategies, important as these are. There is also a vital pastoral aspect, as those who underachieve often have problems with motivation, socialisation and/or self-image. Pastoral support should be the joint responsibility of the school as a whole, subject departments, individual teachers, other supporting adults, and students' parents and families or carers. Contending with underachievement requires thoughtful and sensitively written school policy documents; the effective operation of procedures such as mentoring and counselling; and the building of mutually supportive relationships with the home.

#### **WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN SCHOOL?**

- First ensure that your school has effective and equitable procedures for assessing and identifying students' capacities, and only then collect data on the extent of underachievement. Teare (1997) suggests using an Underachieving Pupil Referral Sheet, and includes a possible format. Where possible, draw on several sources

and types of information, including teachers' judgements, perhaps using Montgomery's 'characteristics checklist' above; don't rely on IQ-type tests alone.

- Collate and analyse information on the predominant factors common to groups of underachieving students, for example whether these are emotional and motivational or are connected with learning strategies, or are a combination of both.
- Some distinctive groups where underachievement is suspected may warrant further, more detailed research and consideration, for example cultural minority groups, or girls or boys in certain subjects. On this issue, see also the Launchpads on Cultural Issues and Gender Issues.
- Establish whether influencing factors might include peer or family pressure, and/or the school's own ethos with regard to the nature of achievement. If any of these are involved, the issue should be addressed proactively but sensitively across the school and/or the wider school community. Teare (1997) makes a number of practical suggestions, for example:
  - Make it clear to everyone in the school that pupils progress at different rates
  - Use displays throughout the school to celebrate motivation and achievement
  - Promote at least some enrichment and extension activities that give pupils of all abilities opportunities to achieve, and ensure that pupils are aware of this philosophy
  - Write a code of achievement, display it widely, and include it in the tutorial programme
  - Publicly recognise the achievements of all pupils in all areas of school life.
  - Ensure that parents and families are fully informed about such initiatives, and involved in them to the greatest possible extent.
- Emotional and motivational difficulties, for example personality or social problems, will benefit from measures such as mentoring or counselling (McClelland, Yewchuk and Mulcahy 1993). Naturally, this should be sympathetic, sensitive and systematic, and may require professional help from outside school. The DfES Standards site describes the work of the mentor as 'A bridge across academic and pastoral support roles with the aim of ensuring that individual pupils and students engage more effectively in learning and achieve appropriately.' Some schools target students who are achieving well but whom teachers feel to be particularly vulnerable to peer group pressure, though it must be remembered that a good pastoral care programme benefits all students, the achieving and the underachieving alike.
- Another important element in the social aspect of underachievement may be disadvantaged home circumstances. There may be students whom the school could help by funding their participation in enrichment activities, or by providing them with study facilities where there is no space or privacy available at home.
- Where the underachievement is associated with learning strategies, the answer may lie in targeted support. Teachers and support staff may use a number of strategies depending on the circumstances, but these might include measures such as:
  - a cross-curricular course in study skills and efficient work habits
  - intensive help with test performance or with techniques for improving concentration

- group collaboration in setting appropriate goals or finishing work
  - liaison with appropriate professionals to provide support for those with specific learning difficulties, or with sensory or physical impairments.
- Use models for enrichment and extension programmes such as that of Renzulli and Reis (1993). This is an inclusive programme, devised to accommodate students with potential, not just 'able achievers'. If put into practice effectively, it can be highly motivating.
- Ensure that your school has an ongoing cycle of professional development and dialogue devoted to the issue of underachievement among students with high potential. As we have suggested, *all* students who are underachieving should receive focused help, but for the reasons argued above the gifted and talented underachiever can more easily escape recognition.

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