

## High Achievement and Underachievement—Through a Developmental Lens

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## A New View

The field needs to develop a new way to look at high and low achievement among gifted adolescents—beyond common stereotypes.

## Trying to Make Sense of Them

- “Measuring” factors assumed to contribute to high or low achievement
- Focusing on finding causes and magical interventions to “fix” underachievement
- Seeing high achievement as a positive to celebrate and learn from

## A Useful Framework

When **counselors** work with either high achievers or underachievers, a developmental template can be helpful for framing presenting issues.

**Parents** may be able to become less judgmental, concerned, anxious, and control-focused--and be more patient and listen better.

**Teachers** can “think development” when concerned about behaviors and when NOT concerned about behaviors.

## Costs and Benefits

What would you have **lost** if you had become (the opposite) during h.school?

What would you have **gained** if you had become (the opposite) during h.school?

Both high and low achievers are continuously developing socially and emotionally. Both may be at risk at some point in their development. Achievement and underachievement can both reflect distress and actually be purposeful.

## Developmental Tasks for Both

- **Identity** (including incorporating giftedness into it)
- **Direction** (with anxiety about the future)
- **Relationship** (moving toward maturity in a significant relationship)
- **Differentiation** (becoming separate from, but still connected to, parents/family)
- **Autonomy** (self-care, decision-making)
- **Sexuality** (what does ‘being male’ & ‘being female’ mean?)

## Developmental Experiences for Both

### Identity

HA: Image based on performance; not necessarily secure re: "Who am I?"

UA: May be actively exploring identity

### Direction

HA: tend to have direction earlier

UA: may feel "paralyzed" by no direction

## Development . . .

### Maturity in Relationships

HA: may have less "toxic" relationships

UA: "mature" relationships may be toxic

### Differentiating from Parents, Resolving Conflict with Family

HA: little room to explore a separate self?

UA: may involve internal/external conflict

## Differentiated Developmentally?

### Autonomy

HA: achievement may not mean independence

UA: may be more independent—not necessarily

### A Sense of Competence

HA: Self-perception based on giftedness as something "fixed" and "vulnerable"

UA: Not necessarily low self-esteem; but not getting positive feedback about academic ability

## Potential "Stuckness": Underachievers

- **Not getting what they need from "the system"** (e.g., a diploma) may be the effect of "conditional" acceptance of authority, lack of differentiation from family.
- **Lack of direction has impact on motivation** for academic work.
- **Not knowing who they are** precludes moving confidently ahead re: direction (although UAs may be allowed more self-exploration)
- **Focusing on an "early-mature" (and sexually active) relationship** may have the effect of not developing a sense of self.
- **Inappropriate autonomy** (e.g., assuming a parental role in the family) may rob child of childhood, being nurtured, having a "bottom line" that isn't the gifted child him/herself.
- **Problems differentiating from family/parents** may generate severe conflict, which can bind the adolescent (through conflict) to parents, lead to early "cutoff" from family, contribute to mental-health issues, create vulnerability to substance abuse.
- **May deem high achievement as too "costly,"** vis a vis potential gain.

## Potential "Stuckness": High Achievers

**No room to explore identity** beyond family expectations, may preclude exploring a career that would be a good fit.

**Desire to have closure may lead to foreclosure** on career direction prematurely (without exploration)

**High achievement may delay exploration of romantic relationships** (not necessarily a bad thing).

**High-functioning parents may be difficult to differentiate from** (easier when it's more clear re: what an adolescent DOESN'T want to be like?).

**Extended financial dependence** delays autonomy.

**High-achiever identity** may be a heavy burden.

**May deem lower achievement as too "costly"** vis a vis potential gain.

## Four-year Follow-up Study: Biggest Challenges After HS

Establishing autonomy\*

Finding identity\*

Significant relationships\*

Finding career direction\*

Academic concerns

New environment

Social concerns

Financing education

\*normal adolescent developmental tasks

### Case Study: Brother and Sister Trauma

- **Brother:** 99%iles  
9 disc. referrals  
16 AP classes  
4.08 GPA  
99 absences  
(24 gr.12; 19 gr.10)  
A's and B's (no C's)
- **Sister:** 99%iles  
12 disc. referrals  
2.76 GPA  
51 absences  
Poor transition to G/T school  
(gr.4,5) Nanny quit,  
2 grandparents died  
(gr.6-8) (A's/B's/C's)  
(gr.9) Incest (A's/C/s/D);  
dad jailed  
(gr.10) (B's/A/C)  
(gr.12) (failed 2 classes)

### Peterson Research Suggesting Underachievement as “Developmental”

- In one longitudinal study (N=14), **resolution of 4 developmental tasks was associated with increased motivation to achieve.**
- Two high-school **extreme underachievers graduated from college** after four years.
- In another study, **37% of the “worst kids in middle school”** had had test scores above the 90th percentile earlier in school.
- In another, **84% high-school underachievers attended college, 52% had four years of college** four years later, and **41% performed better in college** than in high school.
- **20% of middle-school underachievers eventually became achievers** in high school.
- 16% maintained achievement in 1 area.
- 33% had improved one grade point before high school ended.

### The “Function” of High Achievement

- identity?
- praise?
- honor?
- acceptance from a parent?
- feeling of worth?
- self-expression?
- a sense of control in the midst of difficult situation?
- a mask for insecurities, doubts?
- compensation for being bullied?
- dealing with sexual orientation?
- providing control in response to trauma?

### A Positive “Function” of Underachievement

- Identity?
- Loyalty to a parent, peers, family?
- Provokes parents to work together?
- Something for the family to be distracted by, focused on?
- May provide an “in” for a peripheral parent?

### Underachievement

- May reflect individuality, individual identity, strong sense of self
- May reflect **strengths** (courage, independence, ability to view world critically)
- May reflect **learning disability**, poor self-esteem, **depression**, learning style, **personality**, temperament, **lack of identity**, lack of confidence in competence, **difficulty with competition**, diffuse direction, **lack of direction**, style of expression that doesn't fit classroom/teachers, **social > academic preference**

### Potential Counseling Issues

- **Problematic developmental transitions** because of hypersensitivity to change (HA, UA)
- **Stress from high expectations** from self and others; stress-related disorders (HA, UA)
- **Overcommitment**, overinvolvement (HA)
- **Depression** (existential, situation-related, biochemical), anxiety (HA, UA)
- **Mental illness** (e.g., OCD; bipolar; eating disorder; attachment disorder) (HA, UA)
- **Unsettling life events**, with consequent loss/grief (“everything changed”) (HA, UA)
- **Changes in family constellation** (HA, UA)

## Potential Counseling Issues

- Peer relationship losses, changes, adjustments**  
(HA, UA)
- Peer relationship issues** (loneliness, bossiness, arrogance)  
(HA, UA)
- Relocation** (HA, UA)
- Change → Loss → Grief** (HA, UA)
- Loneliness; bullying** (HA, UA)
- Sexual orientation** (wondering, coming to grips, coming out)  
(HA, UA)
- Accident, injury, surgery, chronic illness, new illness**  
(HA, UA)
- "Rejection"** connected with competitive activities  
(HA, UA)
- Perfectionism** (HA, UA)

## "Overexcitabilities" Literature

- Dabrowski's view of pain, struggle
- Some gifted individuals move beyond (alter) psychic structure and evolve into functioning at a higher level—altruistic, sensitive, compassionate
- Psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, emotional--*overexcitabilities*

## School Counselors with HOPE Kids: A New Experience (Summer Program, PK-4)

- Central Theme: "unexpected differentness"
- Subthemes:
  - viewed gifted kids in new ways (via classrooms, guidance)**  
(made sense of theories, concepts)  
(saw giftedness manifested in classroom, guidance)  
(reframed disruptive behaviors)
  - new appreciation for role school counselors can play**  
(credible affirmation "from outside" the highly invested)  
(alert to potential misdiagnoses or missed pathology)
  - sensitivity in unexpected ways**  
(extreme anxiety in unfamiliar territory)  
(quick trust in small group)  
(home life can be difficult)  
(could be bravely compassionate)