Making Sense of UNDERACHIEVEMENT:

Jean Peterson, Ph.D.
Purdue University
jeanp@purdue.edu

What to do <u>with</u> them?

Find them?
Ignore them?
Call them "gifted"?
Un-identify them if they don't produce?
Tailor programs to them?
Mix them with high achievers in programs?
Focus on "making them gifted"?

Whose responsibility is it to address the needs of high-ability underachievers?

DISCUSSION:
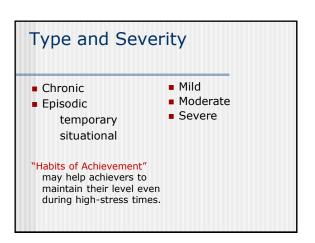## Underachievers: Who Comes to Mind?

- Your feelings toward them?
- Respect? Not respect? (If respect, what?)
- Their family situation?
- Their intellectual strengths?
- Their personal strengths?
- Their feelings about school?
- Their level of self-confidence?
- How they relate to teachers?
- What you wish you understood about them?

The Most Interesting Gifted Kids?
What does "potential to achieve" mean?

- The non-compliant
- The working-hard-at-differentiation
- The challenging-authority
- The angry/discouraged/frustrated
- The social/nonsocial
- The divergent-thinking
- The "outside of the box"
- The complex

Defining Underachievement
Do you know someone who underachieves/underachieved . . .

- **in academic work generally?**
- **episodically? chronically?**
- **in school only? only in certain subjects?**
- **starting in middle school?**
- **only during adolescence? only in college?**
- **in life?**
- **in professional advancement?**
- **by dominant-culture standards <u>only</u>?**
  (Individual, conspicuous, competitive achievement)
- **Typical definition:** discrepancy between expected achievement level, based on some assessment of ability, and actual performance

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Type and Severity

- Chronic
- Episodic
    temporary
    situational

- Mild
- Moderate
- Severe

"Habits of Achievement"
  may help achievers to maintain their level even during high-stress times.

What is Contributing?

- **Cultural values?** (humility? wisdom>knowledge? respect tchrs?)
- **Family values?** (creativity? having a job as a teen? practicality?)
- **Family roles?** (scapegoat? parent-like? worrier?)
- **Lack of home enrichment?** (socioeconomic reasons?)
- **Socio-economic factors?** (can't participate in activities, no quiet place for homework or sleeping? no transportation after school?)
- **Learning disability?** (masked? purposely hidden? spatial? non-sequential? deficient attention? reading problem? Language?)
- **Depression?**
- **Gender?** (self- and/or cultural expectations? family attitudes?)
- **Anti-school family attitudes?**
- **Perfectionism?** (Yes, perfectionism.)
- **Divergent thinking?** (poor fit in structured, sequential . . .)
- **The only thing a student can control?**

Individual Factors

- **Problems with competition?**
- **Passive resistance?**
    (NOT doing is powerful)
- **Hypersensitivity/intensity?**
- **Low sequential ability?**
- **Low self-esteem?**
- **Dominant or dependent personality?**
- **Developmental asynchrony?**
- **Developmental "stuckness"?**
    (leading to internal or external conflict)
- **Early power and attention?**
    (with asynchronous development affecting how handled)
- **Actively forging a personal identity?**
- **Overwhelmed by stimuli?**

Achievement:
within the Child's Control . . .

. . . if there are no intellectual, neurological, physical, or mental health constraints,
and if the environment is conducive.

How frustrating—for highly invested parents, teachers, coaches, whose work is not affirmed!

No "magic bullet" to "fix" underachievement"?

A highly idiosyncratic population and **a complex phenomenon**.

Multiple potential contributors (potentially long-term), unique combinations of factors

Self-Reflection—as Adults

- Were you an achiever or underachiever in h.s.?
- (if the latter) Was yours a "can't" (*e.g., depression, family/personal chaos, confusion*) or a "won't" (*anger, developmental stuckness re: identity, direction, relationships, dependence*) underachievement?
- Was there "fuss" (about your achievement / underachievement)?
- How important was your achiever/underachiever image to you?
- Who was most concerned?
    (about your achievement / underachievement)
- Who were your role models? (e.g., school, home)
- If an underachiever, when did you change? What did you do to change?

High Ability has been Associated with . . .

- Divergent thinking
- Excitability
- Sensitivity
- Perceptiveness
- Entelechy ("drivenness")
    (Lovecky)

- Each is potentially problematic.
- Each might mean a poor fit in school.
- Each has the potential to interfere with relationships with teachers (& peers).

Overexcitabilities
(Dabrowski)

- Intellectual
- Imaginational
- Sensual
- Psychomotor
- Emotional

Which might contribute to problems with academic achievement?

Overexcitabilities:
Impact On Academic Achievement

- during developmental transitions
- during family, personal transitions
  (moves, other life events)
- during times of family stress
- in response to negative life events
- during times of change/loss/grief
- during times of social difficulties
- with perfectionism contributing
- related to developmental tasks

Underachievement:
School Factors

- **The Teacher**
  If classroom not an "environment for learning"
  If child's behavior is not teacher-affirming
  If no "classroom support" from child
  If child "not contributing"
  If child has poor social skills
  If either teacher or student has a "difficult personality"
  If no "relationship"
  If child "doesn't show interest"

  If teacher hostile or indifferent
  If teacher focus is on weaknesses
  If curriculum is inappropriate
  If experiences are negative
  If methods are inflexible
  If teacher has poor rapport

- **The Peer Group**
  If not an "achievement milieu"
  If intimidating
  If anxiety is the commonality
  If extremely competitive

Engaging them . . .

- Creating appropriate programs (H.S. example here)
  After-school lectures, philosophy course, sign language, Future Problem Solving, mentorships, mime troupe, classical music appreciation, creative writing/poetry club, teaching languages to elementary students, art exhibitions/competitions, engineering field trips, one-day career shadowing, Chinese, **discussion groups**
- Helping them with developmental tasks and transitions
- Helping them find "safe harbors" in school
- Applying listening skills, being nonjudgmental
- Understanding that gifted kids may believe that no one can understand their complexity
- Learning from underachievers. Invite them teach you about their world. Ask them what's important to them.
- Recognizing that motivation for academics must come from within. No one can "make them motivated." But we can nurture a relationship and keep them connected to school.

Connecting with Underachievers

- Match curriculum with **learning styles**; **broaden** the curriculum (not just "more-and-faster").
- Pay attention to teacher-student match.
- **Be interested** in their outside-of-school activities, their interests, the "whole student."
- Consider activities that **appeal to divergent, creative thinkers**; express appreciation for their strengths.
- **Be sensitive** to the impact of life events, circumstances, and comment quietly and supportively when opportunities arise.
- Incorporate **noncompetitive activities** into class.
- **Value values** other than academic achievement.
- Offer alternative, **open-ended assignments**
- Provide opportunities to demonstrate talents through **nontraditional products** in classes.

How Can We Know What's Going On?

- Paying attention and employing basic listening-and-responding skills.
- Showing interest in their well-being ("How're you doing?" "You seem kind of quiet today. How are things going?" "What got in the way of getting this assignment done?" "You've been absent. Are you doing OK?")
- Not being strident re: academics (be different from other significant adults)
- Avoiding judgment, accusations ("lazy," "rebellious," "uncooperative")—even in conversations with parents
- Keeping "complexity" in mind and respecting it
- Building and maintaining a relationship
- Not focusing on "fixing" underachievement

The Importance of Being Known by Peers

In the qualitative component of a national bullying study, "being known" was a major theme—vulnerable when "not known."

DISCUSSION: How can teachers and counselors help lonely, "different," new, unconnected gifted kids be known?

One Strategy: to "be Known"

- **Discussion groups** (preventive, developmental)
  * developing expressive language,
  * normalizing developmental challenges and struggles,
  * making social/emotional connections with others like them,
  * improving social skills,
  * appreciating diversity within a high-ability population,
  * learning how to deal with complex feelings,
  * affirming the asset-burden paradox of giftedness,
  * having non-academic time with a nonjudgmental and
      compassionate adult,
  * feeling "known" by peers

  (Peterson's *Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens*, and Betts's ALM materials offer group curricula and guidance.)

Reframing Problems
(phrasing a negative in a positive light)

- "It took hard work to get our (or someone else's) attention."
- "You're a survivor."
- "You were smart enough to talk to someone."
- "You had the courage not to achieve."
- "Underneath you were very concerned about your parents. I can see why you've stayed home."
- "It makes sense that you learned to manipulate people."

Calling Attention to Resilience Factors to Foster Hope

- Good problem-solving skills
- **An ability to gain attention from others**
- An optimistic view of their experiences
- **A positive vision** of a meaningful life
- An ability to be alert and autonomous
- **A tendency to seek novel experiences**
- A proactive perspective
- **Role models outside of the home**--"buffers"
- Positive self-concept
- **[They] don't blame self for family problems**
- **[They] don't feel responsibility for fixing family**
- Social support
- **Intelligence**

Focusing on Affective Concerns

- **Affective dimensions** connected to core curriculum
- **Sending messages of strength:**
  "You'll do what you need to when you're ready"
  "You'll figure out how to get what you need."
  "You have courage."
  "You are a sensitive person."
  "You're working at figuring out who you are."
  "You have good expressive language."
  "You manage a very complicated life amazingly well."
  "You're very smart about people. I've seen that in you."
- **Not implying that they are "defective"**
- Counselors and educators may be able to prevent disasters by noting **risk factors** related to giftedness

DISCUSSION: How to create a relationship?

- What could you say to an underachiever that would not seem like "judgment"?
- What would be an example of empty, ineffective "cheerleading" for an underachiever?
- What might you have noticed that you could comment about positively (and credibly)?
- What might you incorporate into your class (or gifted program) that would appeal to an underachiever?

  (Consider: If highly creative? If you want to get to know him/her better? If you suspect some unique insights about the subject matter? If you know your current mode isn't engaging this student? If you're willing to change what isn't working?)

High Achievement . . .

- May coincide with *over*-commitment, *over*-involvement
- May reflect focus on external validation
- May reflect perfectionism, self-criticism
- May believe that others don't recognize their humanness, feelings, complexity
- May reflect valuing performance > mastery
- May reflect preoccupation with competition
- May simply reflect "easy self-expression"
- Out-performing others central to **identity**?

Underachievement

- May reflect individuality, strong sense of self, individual identity (achievement might not, depending on independence, parental constraints, self-reflection)
- Potentially a strength (e.g., courage; independence; ability to view the world critically; charting own course)
- What function might it serve?
- Sense of competence (might be related to learning disability, self-esteem, self-concept, depression, different learning style, different style of expression)

Peterson Study:

153 Achievers and Underachievers: Hope for Underachievers

- 20% of underachievers (GPA < 3.35—more B's than A's, even if in top 5% ability) became achievers before leaving high school
- 16% maintained achievement in 1 area
- 33% improved one whole gradepoint
- ACT: mean of 93.5%ile for high achievers
  mean of 84%ile for underachievers

(An 84%ile on the ACT doesn't preclude college.)

Peterson Study

Four-Year Follow-Up: 100 Achievers/Underachievers

- 55% of the 20% continued to improve in college
- Of all UAs, 41% improved in college
- 52% UAs, 83% achievers had 4 years of college
- 26% underachievers became achievers; 20% achievers became underachievers (< 3.0)
- 9% high achievers became underachievers

- 82% of UAs to college
- High ACTs predicted success
- 45% Extreme UAs (GPA < 2.75) had 4 years of college
- 41% moderate achievers became moderate underachievers (GPA 2.0-2.99).
- Unwise to "predict the future," based on h.s. achievement level

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Peterson

Follow-up Study: More

*Mode of achievement was fairly stable.

Large numbers in both categories (52% achievers; 44% underachievers) maintained the same level of achievement in college as in high school, suggesting that habits of achievement or underachievement are related to academic performance for at least some students.

Peterson Study

Successful Adults Who Were Underachievers

- Those who succeeded were resilient, difficult- to-raise adolescents with under-involved parents and achieving role models outside of the family.

- They found direction in late 20s.
- Males improved academically in *graduate* school.
- "Feisty" females— a major theme

Peterson Study: Successful Adults who were Adolescent Underachievers (cont.)

- Suggests developmental issues:
  identity, separation/differentiation, autonomy, direction, relationship, developmental "tempo"
- Perceived teacher and parent indifference
- Several with heavy household responsibilities
- Importance of achieving adult mentors

DISCUSSION:

How developmental might academic underachievement be?
How might underachievement affect development?

Bright & Troubled Adolescents

- **Academic** concerns were rarely mentioned in the interviews
- **Teachers** were ranked high as "someone who understands me" and "nicest person"

- Stress and anxiety
- Heavy home responsibilities
- Teachers' "stupid concerns" (vis á vis difficult lives of students)
- Not noticed as "bright" (ITBS > 90th percentile early)

Peterson study:
14 Grads At Risk For Poor Outcomes

Students completed a brief development-oriented survey 2 times per year and wrote "letters" to accompany the surveys (for 4 yrs. after HS).

- At risk for poor educational/personal outcomes:
  - depression/suicidal ideation; extreme conflict with parents; severe underachievement
- Resolution of conflict with parents: the most narrative
- Two extreme underachievers (Ability in top 5% nationally; GPA < 2.0) had graduated from college.
- Resolution of **4 developmental tasks** was correlated with increased motivation to achieve.

Identifying Underachievers

- Scrutinize standardized tests.
  - --check at more than one grade level
- Check school cum files.
  - --of each incoming class, especially in large schools
  - --teacher evaluations from early years
- Cross-check with attendance and tardiness.
  - --might reflect life circumstances, bullying
- Consider impact of family transitions.
- Consider (HS) ASVAB subtest scores in HS.

Shut Up and Listen!
A "Teach Me" Approach

- Posture
- Eye Contact
- Full Attention
- "I don't have a clue."
- Reflect back
  "Sounds as if . . ."
  "I can feel how angry. . ."
  "That sounds scary."
- Check for accuracy
  "Let me see if I've got it right."

- Paraphrase
  "So you've had a lousy week."
  "So your dad was upset."
- Ask for more.
- Open-ended questions
  "Tell me about . . ."
  "Help me understand . . ."
  "How did you handle that?"
  "Can you give me an example?"
  "How are you feeling now?"

Invested Adults:
What to Avoid

- Giving advice
- "Don't you think it would be better if . . ."
- "When I was your age . . . "
- Rescuing them
- Ignoring them, being indifferent
- Being angry at their underachievement
- Being overly invested in their achievement
- Being so invested in them emotionally that the ability to help and affirm them is lost
- Being in awe of their ability, uniqueness
- Expecting rapid change

Underachievement:
What to be Alert to, Cautious About

- Depression
- Suicidal ideation
  ("Should I worry about you—that you'll hurt yourself?")
- Thoughts of violence
- Adults' own feelings about high/low achievement
- Responding only with a punitive approach
- Having only a simplistic view of a very complex, idiosyncratic phenomenon
- Thinking that underachievers are not "gifted"
- Thinking that underachievers do not "deserve" attention in programs for gifted kids
- Thinking that underachievement predicts the future

Questions to Ponder: Discussion

- **Is** academic achievement *"the most important thing"?*
- What do we tell parents, teachers, and coaches who are wringing their hands over an underachiever?
- How can we explain that the phenomenon is so *idiosyncratic and complex* that a single approach or intervention is not likely to be effective?
- How can we apply an appropriately *systemic perspective?*
- How can we convey *respect? nonjudgment?*
- How can we embrace underachievers in programs?
- How can we stop "being *like every other adult*" in how we approach low/non-performing gifted kids?
- Should we recommend gifted underachievers for gifted programs? (then . . . what kind of program?)

Questions to Ponder, cont.

- How can we remember to apply a developmental template—first?
- How can we avoid predicting the future on the basis of one developmental stage?
- Can "systems" fail the child, rather than vice versa?
- Who among gifted students needs programs?
- Who needs programs/services more—high achievers or underachievers?
- Who needs differentiated curriculum more—high achievers or underachievers?
- Who needs differentiated counseling approaches more?
- How can we meet underachievers where they ARE?