

# Reasons Why Gifted Children Sometimes Underachieve

## Introduction

This is an edited extract from *Underachievement in Gifted and Talented Students*, a paper presented at the "Now is the Future: The Gifted Student in Today's Secondary Schools" Gifted and Talented Education Conference, Auckland, October 2000.

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2001

School marks are determined by many factors, of which intelligence is only one. We need to ask ourselves:

- whether or not the student is consistently underachieving;
- if the underachievement is demonstrated in only some areas, and if so, which areas;
- if there is a pattern of behaviours emerging which is contributing to the student's lack of performance or motivation.

We need to bear in mind that:

- it is normal for a student not to do equally well in every school subject;
- temporary drops in school performance during certain transitions within a student's school years can be expected, and are not necessarily cause for concern.
- And finally, we need to recognise that changing achievement patterns takes time.

"For every year of underachievement it can take eight months to turn it around"

(Pat Schuler, 1998).

Therefore it is important that we examine several key areas when we seek to establish reasons for underachievement, for "one shoe fits all" does not apply. It is helpful to examine:

- the degree of perfectionism,
- the sensitivity of the student,
- signs of possible learning disability which may be disguised by the student's giftedness, and
- the degree to which the educational programme is appropriate for the student.

In doing so, we may begin to build up a picture of the individual student and address the underachievement in a manner appropriate for that student.

Underachievement in gifted students has its basis in a wide range of potential contributing factors, all of which are worthy of close examination. Social and emotional factors contribute heavily, and those people involved in developing individual education programmes (IEPs) for gifted students need to be well versed in them. Not all underachievement can be attributed to only social and emotional factors however.

Arguably the most frequently unidentified gifted and talented student, the "cross-over" student, is both gifted and has learning difficulties. Those with severe learning difficulties are usually recognised because of their need for full educational assessment. However, the gifted "cross-over" student performing at an average level is most frequently

overlooked. The double-labelled, or "cross-over" student who has a learning difficulty or a physical or sensory disability may have a high degree of frustration and low self-esteem, especially if coupled with a high degree of perfectionism.

This becomes more apparent when students are assessed on a full educational assessment. Tests such as the WISC III provide excellent diagnostic sub-tests, which can indicate learning blocks caused by skills such as short-term memory or coding. A student who normally achieves in the 55th percentile range yet who achieves in the 40th percentile range for coding or short-term memory, is not as disadvantaged as a student who normally achieves in the 95th percentile range and yet who achieves in the 40th percentile range for coding or short-term memory. The gap between potential and two key areas in their performance is nowhere near as great.

The unrecognised "cross-over" student is not only trapped in a cycle of underachievement, resultant frustration, and low self-esteem, s/he is also an untapped, wasted talent that society can ill-afford to lose.

### **Problems for Gifted with Learning Disabilities (GLD)**

The cross-over student can be described under three categories:

- Those who are identified as gifted, but who have subtle, often unrecognised difficulties that usually kick in around middle high school, because the programme is more demanding, for example, they can take it all in but not pour it out.
- Learning disabled identified, but not gifted identified.
- Students not identified for either gifted or learning disabled.

It is these students who are possibly of the most concern, and it is they whose profiles are explored in more depth in this paper.

There is no one way to address the needs of gifted underachievers, and ideally a school should have a very able team of professionals to whom the parents, principal, dean, teachers, or students themselves can turn: counsellors, ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) teacher, learner support teachers, careers advisor, pastor and/or appropriate cultural spiritual leaders where possible, as well as a gifted and talented education (GATE) coordinator. Consultation should occur with outside experts in areas beyond the team's levels of expertise. Through a cooperative team approach the school can then endeavour to optimise the academic, socio-emotional, and spiritual growth of the student.

### **Profiles**

These profiles reflect their own unique combinations of the issues frequently faced by gifted and talented students. Every student is different, yet often there are common identifying issues, which, when dealt with and managed successfully, can turn around the pattern of underachievement. Each of the students listed below were 13 years of age at the time of initial assessment, although their profiles could well apply to students of any age. The student's names have been changed for anonymity.

#### **Profiles: Belinda**

Belinda was identified early as a special needs student, and had remedial assistance off and on throughout her primary schooling. She suffered from delayed maturation in many areas. She displayed tantrum behaviour from a very early age, and still, at home could become so intensely angry and frustrated she was unable to speak. She found reading difficult, though this gradually improved over time. Her PAT scores in reading, vocabulary, and listening were consistently low, yet she could score in the 80s for mathematics. She presented as a highly sensitive student, with a very deep-seated passion and concern for environmental issues. She could be described as "an old soul" in the wisdom and depth of perception she showed in one-to-one conversations. She was a self-confessed perfectionist and was highly self-critical. She was afraid of making mistakes and was prone to depression. She judged her self-worth upon her performance, and being very sensitive to criticism, was afraid to just "be". She had difficulty with peer relationships. She was frustrated by written work, saying she was unable to write down fluently the ideas that were in her head.

### **Pathway**

Referral for full educational assessment by an educational psychologist.

### **Referral result**

Belinda's assessment confirmed her very high cognitive ability in some areas, as well as her specific learning difficulties in performance. Her arithmetic scores were in the 98th percentile, and her oral comprehension scores were in the 95th percentile. Her strengths were in verbal concept formation, logical and abstract thinking, and concentration and attention as well as those listed above.

She had some enormous comparative disabilities: Her scores for coding were at the 2nd percentile, scores for symbol search at the 37th percentile, and scores for picture arrangement were at the 50th percentile. While this latter is "average", it is 45 percent and 48 percent lower than two of her major strength areas, hence it was still a major handicap. These scores contributed to her overall processing speed, which is at the 13th percentile. Of the three, coding is Belinda's most significant learning block.

Literacy skills are weak, and behind her chronological age of 13.9: reading accuracy was 10.6 years, and reading comprehension 11.3 years. The most telling statement was perhaps that made orally by the psychologist to Belinda and her parents: "You have the ability to complete a Ph.D. – you simply need more time than others to work through and complete it."

### **Outcomes**

Belinda has had, and will continue to have, special learning assistance, including some very valuable work with the educational psychologist after her assessment. She was given similar opportunities in exam conditions as was Craig, and her teachers guided Belinda on how best she could demonstrate her knowledge. However, it was crucial for her development that the school assist her to develop in her areas of giftedness. Inclusion in philosophy classes and other special GATE programmes was one way. More significantly, it was important to develop Belinda's social skills and nurture the potential leadership skills she had. Time was created in her timetable to work with a teacher mentor to develop a special environmental project. This project would ultimately involve other students, but she, as initiator, would lead the project. She was also invited to participate in a GATE Community Service programme to tutor younger students. Belinda's self-esteem and self-concept improved significantly with the implementation of these strategies. Her parents, over time, reported that she became much easier to live with. Belinda herself acknowledged her areas of strength and she continued to mentor younger students with learning difficulties and work upon her own personal development.

## Profiles: Craig

Craig presented as a gifted student with well-developed higher-order thinking skills. The scores on his Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs) were very high, and teachers found him enthusiastic, diligent, highly creative, and motivated. His written product was of a considerably lower standard than would be expected given his obvious verbal ability. He was an avid reader. Overall his grades were Bs and Cs with the exception of an A in drama. His French teacher observed his difficulty in learning and retaining French vocabulary from one day to the next. Closer enquiry from teachers revealed that Craig was frequently forgetful and somewhat disorganised. This was usually attributed to stress, as Craig was in high demand in a wide range of subject and extra-curricular areas. His parents had not expressed concern, but were grateful when the school expressed an interest in ascertaining whether or not Craig had any specific block holding him back. Craig himself expressed a frustration with spelling, and commented that he was not as quick in recalling his basic facts in maths as he would like.

### Pathway

Referral for full educational assessment by an educational psychologist.

### Referral result

The report confirmed Craig's very high ability and the fact that he did, in fact have some impediments to his learning. Overall, he achieved in the 96th percentile, with his verbal achievement in the 97th percentile. Craig's performance ability, though high at the 86th percentile was pulled down by his speed of processing ♦ which was at the 39th percentile.

He had difficulty in three major areas:

- **Coding:** the speed at which new tasks are learned, visual memory, motor coordination, perception, and persistence (his scores were in the 16th percentile).
- **Picture arrangement:** planning ability, sequencing information, foresight, social intelligence (street smarts), and understanding of subtleties of relationships (his scores were in the 50th percentile).
- **Symbol search:** speed of processing, controlled attention, and memory scanning abilities (scores in the 63rd percentile).

Of these three, coding was the most significant learning block. Craig would have enormous difficulty getting work down on paper, especially under timed test conditions. Memory for new work is hindered by poor visual memory; such students are often disorganised, "forgetful", and struggle to remember information that needs visual memory for recall, such as spelling, and foreign language vocabulary.

While his latter two scores are of middle average ability, given the speed at which Craig's brain works in other areas, they are still a source of frustration and comparative "lack".

The psychologist pointed out that Craig's profile exhibits some dyslexic characteristics and his spelling accuracy does not reflect his "exceptional oral English language ability".

### Outcomes

Craig was unaware that he was gifted, and his sense of self was raised appreciably when he realised that his weaknesses were not of his own making. He became even more motivated to achieve, and to overcome the invisible obstacles before him.

Craig was already in some high ability classes, so curriculum adaptation to cater for his gifted needs was already underway. However, it was important that Craig's teachers were aware of his special learning needs. The classes already use laptops for much of their work, so production on a daily basis and for assignments was already being facilitated. Craig was given extra time in exams, taught how to function effectively with a writer, and encouraged to develop further his typing skills on the computer, so that he could become independent of a writer. Supervision of special exam conditions at Craig's school is the responsibility of a learner support teacher. He was taught strategies for enhancing his memory skills, particularly focusing upon his auditory ability, rather than his visual ability.

It is important to note that Craig, like the other students, was given a choice as to whether or not he pursued the options above. Student ownership of the "solutions" is crucial. Not all secondary students will accept special exam conditions, preferring to remain anonymous. They should be aware that though they may refuse an option, the door is open for them to pick it up at a later date.

### **Profiles: Steven**

A well-spoken, verbally fluent boy, Steven was highly perfectionistic, performing in the high 90s for PATs. Teachers assumed Steven was over-confident and brash, describing him as intense and easily upset. He acknowledged he was highly competitive, constantly comparing himself with others, usually unfavourably. He was not a risk-taker socially because he feared rejection. He was afraid of making mistakes, and afraid of revealing his imperfections. He admitted that he expected too much of himself and others, and that he experienced a lot of stress and anxiety over his performance. Steven's grades, by year 9, were slipping to predominantly Bs and Cs and given his frustration and perfectionism, were likely to continue their slide if he gave up.

The thing most likely to frustrate and upset Steven was his making mistakes because "others had given him the wrong information". Throughout his primary and intermediate schooling, his teachers acknowledged that Steven was very bright, but he was increasingly reluctant to commit his work to paper. He had a self-professed struggle with spelling, and his handwriting was untidy. He observed he could think much faster than he could write, and that fear of making mistakes slowed him down even further. As a result, he lost his train of thought and commented that he often finished up writing almost gibberish under timed test conditions. Steven was capable of holding extremely mature, adult-level conversations, yet frequently was very fixed in his thinking, and often unable to "read" social signals.

### **Pathway**

Referral for full educational assessment by an educational psychologist.

### **Referral result**

Steven's full scale score was >99th percentile on the WISC III, indicating that not only was he in the "very superior" range, he was off the scale, and to assess his true ability, further tests would be needed. However, that was not the issue. What was glaringly apparent was that in spite of this score, Steven scored well below average for coding, although on all other tests he scored very highly. Coding indicates the speed at which new tasks are learned, visual memory, motor coordination, perception, and persistence.

Steven's spelling was equal to his age level – evidence of the asynchronous development of an exceptionally gifted young man.

## **Outcome**

A full, clear explanation of the findings was given to Steven, along with some specific counselling on handling his perfectionism. Exploration of exam conditions proved worthwhile for Steven. His marks improved immediately, and he could see the value of the use of his computer to develop skills that would enable him to achieve high quality product. Steven sustained his improvement, became much more settled in class and amongst his peers, and was less inclined to become distressed. His parents reported a significant change in behaviour at home as Steven became an autonomous learner.

Like many other gifted students, Steven was also loaned a valuable resource, *The Gifted Kid's Survival Guide: A Teen Handbook* by J. D. Galbraith (1996), along with *Perfectionism: What's Bad About Being Too Good* by M. Adderholt-Elliott and Goldberg (1999). These books are also good for parents to share with their teenager.

'No ray of sunshine is ever lost but the green which it awakens into existence needs time to sprout. And it is not always granted for the sower to see the harvest. All work that is worth anything is done in faith'.

- Albert Schwietzer

## **Profiles: William**

William was a gifted student who had several changes of school due to his father's job. William had been a top debater, had won awards for leadership, and had shown a passion and high aptitude in creative writing, mathematics, and music. His underachievement began sometime at his previous school, an intermediate school, where he dropped from being top of his year level academically and a top sportsman, to an average student who apparently neither cared about his marks nor put much time and effort into his work, in class, or at home. A knee injury at the beginning of his year 9 coincided with yet another start at a new school, and the cricket season (where previously he had excelled). The knee injury persisted, affecting not only his participation in sport and physical education, but also his ability to mix in with students in the way he had previously always chosen to make new friends. By mid-year, his marks were sliding to the 50s and 60s, and his parents were highly concerned at the change in their son, who had become uncommunicative and rebellious.

## **Pathway**

Ongoing personal counselling from GATE coordinator over the remainder of William's year 9 year, which included career counselling; motivational, subject, and personal goal-setting; and application of techniques to raise self-esteem. Establishing career potential is a significant tool to switching on the underachiever.

## **Outcome**

A lifting in marks by the end of that year by 10 to 15 percent with a subsequent rise the following year to a level commensurate with his abilities. By year 11 William was vying for position of dux of his year level, was back into his sports, and was intrinsically motivated to succeed.

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- Albert Schwietzer

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