

Can Our Gifted Children Remain Gifted?

© 2010 by Andi Stix, Ed.D. & PCC

Published by Gems of AGATE, vol. 34 (1)

Oftentimes parents think their children are above average because they read at an early age. In many instances, parents confuse a child's ability to remember things accurately with the notion that the youngster is above the norm. By 3rd grade, children who read at the average maturational period catch up, and the playing field becomes more level. According to the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP), a large number of students who are considered gifted in 4th grade are no longer identified as such by the time they reach 8th grade. The decline continues in high school. By the time students reach 12th grade, the number identified as gifted decreases by 60% for Caucasians, 87% for Latinos, and 65% for African Americans.

As children progress through the formative years, parents begin to wonder what went wrong. The gleam in a child's eyes or the natural sense of wonder fades into the deep recesses of average behavior or apathy. The energy you invested to instill a sense of passion in your preschooler seems wasted now that your child is susceptible to other influences. And you realize that just because your child was bright or gifted at the elementary level does not ensure that he or she will grow up to be a highly productive adult. According to Sylvia Rimm, "Underachievement is a discrepancy between a child's school performance and some index of the child's ability. If children are not working to their ability in school, they are underachieving" (p. 18).

What causes the shut-down in creative ability as children age? The open classroom philosophy of the late 70s and early 80s encouraged creative problem solving and critical thinking. However, concerns over a lack of proficiency in basic skills resulted in an about-face. Under the Bush administration, No Child Left Behind legislation pushed for wide-scale testing that emphasized reading ability and arithmetic competency instead of critical or creative thinking.

Moreover, during difficult economic times, schools are more likely to enroll borderline special needs students in inclusion programs, keeping them in traditional classrooms instead of providing more expensive small-group support services. Teachers are expected to meet the needs of students with a wider range of abilities—a difficult task, even with in-class support staff. One result is that expectations for gifted students are substandard for their capabilities (*Good, 1981; Hale-Benson, 1986*).

The National Association of Gifted Children has responded, in part, by pushing for differentiation of instruction, requesting that teachers offer different types of instruction for a more diverse student population (*www.nagc.org*). However, these practices require a great deal of time and resources. The approach seems easier to implement at the elementary level, where one teacher can monitor 25 students, rather than at the secondary school levels, where teachers are responsible for 125-150 students per day. On the other hand, secondary teachers who make the time to implement these practices typically find that their students are more engaged.

What happens when students are no longer challenged or engaged in the classroom? Their actions begin to change as they try to preserve their brains. Students may:

- Act out and bother others around them, causing teachers to respond with negative attention. The children then become accustomed to eliciting negative feedback.

- Become inattentive by allowing their imaginations to take them to more stimulating places, thereby isolating them from their classmates.
- Avoid peer relations by reading books under their desks and performing other self-regulated activities.

Peer Pressure

Social pressure may also cause students to no longer perform at their natural achievement level. When elementary schools merge from different parts of town into a junior or middle school, for example, students' self-esteem may be challenged. Those who were extraordinarily smart in elementary school may meet other students who surpass them intellectually and cause them to question their abilities. Researchers also point to an inability to persevere, a lack of goals, and feelings of inferiority (*Gallagher, 1991*) as reasons for the decline in performance and motivation of once-gifted students.

How can children preserve their academic self-esteem? Teenagers look to avenues where they can become good achievers. Some who are bored may find one area to focus all their attention, such as rocketry, at the exclusion of everything else, including friendships. Others may hit the pavement and become street-smart, joining gangs or groups.

Faced with pressure to conform, gifted and creative students may neglect the development of their gifts. (*Reis & McCoach, 2000*). Why stand out? Why be considered a "brainiac" or a weirdo? Isn't it better to be popular and funny? (Berndt, 1999) And what happens to students of color? How does being academically smart infringe upon their racial or ethnic image? It may not be cool to be smart (*Sheridan, 1999*). Or, will their friends ask them why they choose to act "white"? (*Fordham, 1988*). When adolescents have a secure self-image and racial or ethnic identity, peer pressure to conform does not cause the building block tower to fall. However, if their self-image is not secure, then they will lean toward the norm.

What about gender differences? Research indicates that 25% of above-average gifted females are underachievers, compared to 50% of above-average underachieving males (*Weiss, 1972 and Colangelo, et. al, 2004*). According to Mary Pipher (2009), boys feel that their success is attributed to their ability, whereas when they fail, it's due to external factors. On the other hand, girls attribute success to luck or hard work, attributing failure to their lack of ability.

In terms of gifted minority students, Clark found that underachieving African American students have parents who are less optimistic for their children's future, are less assertive about their children's education, and set unrealistic and unclear expectations (1983). According to Donna Ford and Janice Hale-Benson, minority students report that they have less positive teacher-student relations. They claim that teachers expect less of them (*Good, 1981; Hale-Benson, 1986*) and provide a less supportive classroom climate. These students also report that they become disinterested in school because it doesn't relate to their lives (*Ford, 1995*). Cultural differences also work against them. Hale-Benson found that, as minorities mature, they tend to be more cooperative in nature. This runs counter to the academic tide, where competition increases with each academic level (1986).

High Achieving Minorities

What factors influence high-achieving minorities? What factors impact their gifts and creativity?

- Family structure (*Rimm & Lowe, 1988*): When the family demands that a child perform up to potential, there is a greater likelihood that the child will not fall to other influences.
- Academic achievement level of the mother or caregiver. A higher education level achieved by the mother or caregiver increases the chances for a child's academic success.

- Social influences: Sometimes a child will find a mentor outside the family who believes in the child, along with his or her uniqueness and quirks. Gifted students often cite a teacher, relative, or an older peer who had a major impact on their self-image. Sometimes the influence comes from afar, from someone who has never even had contact with the child. A young athlete, for example, may try to emulate Pele the soccer star, or a teen may have designed new recipes after watching Julia Child.

Wish List

What can we do about gifted underachievement? For starters, we need to acknowledge that we are losing many of our bright students. Understanding this, we can begin to address the multifaceted issues contributing to the overall problem.

At the elementary level, we can offer students the ability to design and invent, not only to read, write, and do arithmetic. We can offer differentiation and provide the opportunity for independent study, where students' interests may lie. Classroom strategies such as a discussion, debate, or simulation can be encouraged, where students discuss the content with their peers. As a result, these hands-on practices mimic or provide real life experiences that motivate students. Lastly, the process of learning should be applauded, offering student feedback, revision, and a chance of reflection, just as much of the final product (Emerick, 1992).

Gifted students have reported that they breezed through in elementary school, never opening a textbook at home. Then, in their middle and high school years, they did not know how to handle the challenge. They simply shut down. So, at the middle school level, we can offer advisories for gifted students, where class sizes are small and intimate. In an advisory, students can sit in a circle and discuss adolescent concerns. This small setting can foster honest discussions on how it feels to stand out and be gifted, yet want to fit in—a situation that most “tweens” have to face. We can help students begin to assert their independence in a healthy and constructive manner.

Administrators can make sure the middle school is genuinely functioning as a “middle school” and not as a junior high school with a middle school title. We can establish schools within a school, where groups of teachers share the same batch of students and establish a set of norms and practices. We need to make sure our gifted students are assigned and clustered in small groups within the regular classroom, rather than being distributed across many classes—separated and isolated—in an attempt to balance ability levels.

At the high school level, we can offer leadership coaching courses that nurture students' leadership abilities while teaching critical life and coaching skills: problem solving and organizational skills, goal setting, and working effectively with peers and the school organization. We need to create classroom cultures that applaud creative thought and thinking, such as word play and making unusual connections. We also want to offer course material that's challenging, fun, motivating, and above and beyond the expectations of the state exams. If we can motivate our students, they will be passionate about learning.

At the same time, we need to take a more authentic view of students instead of emphasizing their performance on state exams. With those who have conditions that often mask giftedness, such as ADD or hyperactivity, we can better determine their potential if we focus on how they express themselves and their ideas.

Overall, we need to create an image that smart is cool. How? One way would be to take our cue from the beverage industry's successful effort to introduce diet cola to the male market. Coke's commercial

featured male construction workers showing off their “six-pack” abs while drinking diet soda during an afternoon break. The image caught on, the industry bridged the gender gap, and sales of diet beverages soared. A similar marketing strategy could be built around slogans such as “smart is cool,” or “you can be smart and humble, too.” This is where the life coaching plays a part. Students can *be encouraged* to use their smarts in fun and creative ways, rather than to show off.

So, let’s roll up our sleeves and get to work. It’s much better to be proactive rather than reactive. Let’s not lose any more gifted students.

References

- Berndt, T. J. (1999). Friends’ influence on students’ adjustment to school. *Educational Psychologist*, 34, 15-28.
- Clark, B. (1983). *Growing up gifted* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Colangelo, N., Kerr, B., Christensen, P., & Maxey, J. (2004). A comparison of gifted underachievers and gifted high achievers. In S. M. Moon (Ed.). *Social/emotional issues, underachievement, and counseling of gifted and talented students* (pp.119-132). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Emerick, L. J. (Summer 1992). Academic underachievement among the gifted: Students’ perceptions of factors that reverse the pattern. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 36(3), 140-146.
- Ford, D. Y. (1992). Determinants of underachievement as perceived by gifted, above average, and average Black students. *Roeper Review*, 14, 130-136.
- Ford, D. Y. (1996). *Reversing underachievement among gifted Black students*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ford, D. Y. (1995). *A Study of achievement and underachievement among gifted, potentially gifted, and average African-American students* (Research Monograph 95128). Storrs, CT: The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut.
- Fordham, S. (1988). Racelessness as a strategy in Black students’ school success: Pragmatic strategy or pyrrhic victory? *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(1), 54-84.
- Fox, L. H. (1981). Preparing gifted girls for future leadership roles. *Gifted, Creative, & Talented*, 17, 7-11.
- Gallagher, J. J. (1991). Personal patterns of underachievement. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 14, 221-233.
- Good, T. L. (1981). Teacher expectations and student perceptions: A decade of research. *Educational Leadership*, 38(5), 415-421.
- Hale-Benson, J. (1986). *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles* (2nd ed.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP), headed by the National Center for Educational Statistics, US Department of Education
- Pipher, Mary. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. New York: Random House, Ballantine Books.
- Reis, S. M. and McCoach, D. B. (Summer 2000). The underachievement of gifted students: What do we know and where do we go? *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 44, 152-170.
- Rimm, S. & Lowe, B. (1988). Family environments of underachieving gifted students *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 32, 353-361.
- Sheridan, D. (October, 1999). Scant school accommodation for state’s brightest children. *Boston Magazine*, p. 81.
- Weiss, L. (1972). Underachievement – empirical studies. *Journal of Adolescence*, 3, 143-151.

Dr. Andi Stix is the director of G-tec Kids, an after-school creative arts and science enrichment program in New Rochelle, NY. She is a national trainer and educational coach, as well as the co-author of Teachers as Classroom Coaches (published by ASCD) and the Exploring History series (published by Teacher Created Materials) for middle and high school students.