Intervention With Underachieving Gifted Children: Rationale and Strategies

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The literature on the gifted argues that the majority of these persons lead productive lives and demonstrate leadership in social and professional settings (Halpin, Payne, & Elliot, 1975; Terman & Oden, 1947). Even within the public schools, gifted children often assume leadership roles, are popular, and succeed academically. When an intellectually gifted child does experience personal-social adjustment or academic problems, the situation can be extremely frustrating for persons attempting to intervene and help the child.

Because of recent state and federal legislation, public schools are having to identify and appropriately educate gifted children. For school psychologists and other special services personnel who work with exceptional children, the gifted child with problems poses special challenges. Gowan, in two excellent articles published over 20 years ago, reviewed the nature of underachievement among gifted children (Gowan, 1955, 1957). His underscoring of the pervasiveness of the child's difficulties continues to be valid:

The gifted underachiever...appears to be a kind of intellectual delinquent who withdraws from goals, activities and active social participation.

(Gowan, 1957, p. 101)

The gifted underachiever has been of interest to a number of writers, and the current literature was reviewed recently by Fine (1977). This child has been "diagnosed" and treated from a psychodynamic position (Fein, 1958, 1974; Newman, Dember, & Krug, 1973), from a behavioral framework (Workman, 1978), and a family systems viewpoint (Thiel & Thiel, 1977). In this paper, a set of viable postulates regarding the dynamics of and a rationale for intervention with underachieving gifted children will be presented. A definition of the students being discussed follows.

Any predictive formula for achievement based on IQ scores needs to tolerate a wide variance. Most persons in education today are aware of the vagaries of intelligence testing, of the fact that a final score such as IQ or mental age is typically the product of several subscores across a range of tasks, and also that motivational and interest variables can substantially affect a simplistic IQ-to-achievement predictability. With these considerations in mind, we were not concerned with a gifted child whose academics fell short of his ideally viewed achievement potential but who was still actively participating in class and who indeed was performing above average academically.

Nor were we concerned with the child whose interest in academic classwork, historically high, had waned over a relatively short period of time. This student's pattern of high achievement is well established and the momentary reduction in motivation may be due to a variety of factors that can either be understood and tolerated or approached with sympathetic curricular modification or interest boosting. Also, despite a high IQ, a given child's learning potential via traditional academics may be limited, as in the case of a learning disability child. For example, a child might be a good auditory learner and have good verbal skills, but be immature in perceptual-motor and visual-perceptual development to a degree that interferes with early academic learning when motor and perceptual skills are vital. Some of the curriculum and programming techniques now common with learning disability children should be usable with the learning disabled high IQ child, and a concomitant emotionally supportive relationship between teacher and child would also be very useful.

The child we are focusing on is one who evidences a long-standing pattern of academic underachievement not accounted for by learning disability variables. The child is typically not detected as being intellectually gifted on entering school because of the school's penchant for equating intellectual giftedness with high academic attainment, as if they were one and the same. Only as group or individual intellectual testing is initiated or as remarkable discrepancies in the child's academic performance appear (e.g., 98th percentile in reading and 30th percentile in mathematics), do educators become aware of the child's giftedness. Our own interest and contact with such children was further bolstered recently by an in-depth structured interview with several gifted underachievers and their families.

Some Important Dynamics of Underachievement

The following are what we consider to be important, relevant aspects of the dynamics of underachieving gifted children. As indicated, these postulates were generated from the existing literature and our own direct involvement clinically and through research with these children. In addition to the literature already cited, writings on attribution theory (Bar Tal, 1978; Rosenthal, 1976; Thomas, 1979), family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978), family-school collaboration (Aponte, 1976; Treffinger & Fine, 1979; Tucker & Dyson, 1976), and Transactional Analysis (James & Jongeward,
1971; Mellor & Schiff, 1975; Schiff, 1975) contributed to our understanding of the underachieving gifted child and subsequently to our efforts at intervention.

Low Self-Esteem
While there may be several mitigating factors associated with the inception of the underachieving pattern, low self-esteem seems to be experienced by most of these children. This in turn affects the child’s willingness to risk and supports withdrawal from academic challenges. The child may exhibit a lot of “bravado” but on closer inspection his/her personal anxieties are quite apparent.

Deficient Skills
The child may have initiated a kind of game around achievement on the order of “I can do it if I want to—but I don’t so I won’t.” But the cumulative effect of not applying one’s self is to become increasingly deficient in basic skills and in study habits. This observation ties in with the first point. The low self-esteem coupled with deficient skills makes new academic learning tasks appear quite formidable and the child is likely to continue avoiding involvement. This point may be overlooked by teachers who believe that because of the child’s brightness, application of effort is all that is required.

Reinforcement Effects
The expected concern and attention by parents and teachers over the underachievement pattern are likely reinforcing the child for nonachievement. This presents the picture of a passive-aggressive child who “gets back” at others through the effects such as anger, frustration, and despair that nonachievement produces in others.

Motor Deficiency
A number of underachieving gifted children experienced precocious language development which provoked positive attention from parents and others. With the verbal arena then identified by the child as one in which he could succeed, the child was less likely to invest energy into motor activities, including sports and pencil-paper tasks. The child subsequently presents a kind of pseudodeficiency in motor areas which hints at a learning disability via a lag in motor or perceptual motor development. The establishment of etiology is however confounded and the main issue here may be motivation and experience rather than a psychophysical limitation. If this is the case, remedial education may only serve to solidify the child and family’s belief in the “deficiency” and paradoxically support the maintenance of the motor problems.

The senior author recalls some underachieving gifted boys complaining that the reason they were rejected by other children was because of their awkwardness in sports. In fact it was their poor sportsmanship that the other children resented. Also, the two boys were not notably awkward but both had advanced verbal skills and would rather talk than play.

Adultizing the Child
The precocious verbal skills tie in with some other problem patterns occurring initially within the family and then often at school with the teacher. The communication between parents and the child becomes “adultized” as the parent is seduced by the child’s verbal skills. The parent interacts as if the child were an older, more mature individual. This can lead to generational lines getting crossed. The parents pull back from a parent-child relationship and respond to the child as another adult. This pattern gives the child more power than he/she has judgment to utilize, creating a feigned maturity which supports the child’s nonachievement pattern. The parents shift to a higher intellectual level of discussion and often get distracted from the main issue, which is the child’s entrenched pattern of nonapplication to school learning.

If the teacher also buys into this adultizing of the relationship then the nonachieving pattern is additionally reinforced.

Defense Tactics
An important aspect of the meshing of the child’s high intellectual ability, advanced verbal skills, and personal need to support the achievement pattern is the emerging of powerful defenses. Specifically, the child develops skills of intellectualizing and rationalizing behaviors and events so as to define what is occurring in personally favorable terms.

The child is skilled in deflecting confrontations and in creating verbal tangents; the consequence of these defensive tactics is to considerably weaken the attempts by concerned others to reason with the child and to modify the nonachievement pattern. The more the concerned parent or teacher attempts to verbally reason through with the child what is happening, the more confusing and overintellectualized the conversation is likely to become.

Family Conflicts
There may be conflicts within the family system which focus on the underachieving gifted child and which get expressed through triangulation of relationships. For example, there may be the parents, the underachieving gifted child, and a more conforming “good” child. Or mother and father may differ in their relationship to the gifted child, with one parent supportive of the child and one who is less tolerant; consequently some strain in the relationship between the two parents is likely to exist.

An important issue is whether the parents have chosen to act out their existing conflicts around the gifted child, or whether the gifted child in fact has generated the conflict. In the former case, it is necessary for one or both parents to maintain the child as a problem (scapegoat) so that parents do not have to deal directly with their own more basic conflicts.

Interaction Dynamics
There are usually “family rituals” which support the
dynamics of interaction between the underachieving gifted child and parents. These rituals may include the parent's explicit strategy for motivating the child. For example, after school the mother anxiously inquires if the child has homework; the child makes an ambiguous response; the parent gets angry and threatens to call school; the child produces some homework; and then the ritualistic interactions shift to how long the child will work and whether the assignment will be completed tonight or tomorrow morning, etc.

The time and energy spent by the parent in tracking down the assignments and in expressing concern and anger are quite extensive. The task itself is often fairly quickly completed once the child puts energy into it.

**Outside Interests**

Even though the child may be doing poorly at school, he/she usually has some outside interest into which a lot of energy is being placed. One notion prevalent among proponents of the gifted is that the child is likely excelling in some area, possibly in reaction to finding school boring. Often, however, it seems that the child is into some solitary activity such as nature study, coin or stamp collecting, rocketry, etc., is not excelling at this activity, and the involvement supports a pattern of social isolation. The child may have a friend with whom the interest is shared, but often the friend also has social problems.

**Parent/School Conflicts**

Parents and school persons may be in conflict over how to cope with the child and in their view of the responsibility of the other. Keeping in mind that the child is manipulative and defensive, the scene is set for parents and school to believe that the other is either not doing enough of the needed things or is doing harmful things to the child.

The school's view, for example, might be that the parents need to motivate the child. But by this point in time the parents have experienced some conflict of their own around the child's lower achievement and are feeling impatient to bring about changes. They in turn might feel that the school has shirked its responsibilities by not creating a stimulating enough curriculum for the child. Out of such confusion, both parents and school may alternate in acting out a perceived "victim" and "persecutor" role with the other. In the meantime, the child suffers because the status quo is maintained.

**Interpersonal Attitudes**

Interpersonally the child is often experienced by others as coming from an "I'm OK — You're Not OK" position. The child may use ridicule, sarcasm, biting humor, or big words, to put down other students. The social isolation that many of these children experience is to a large degree engineered by their own interpersonal behavior and attitude.

The immediate picture that a stranger to a situation would observe may appear to be one of the other children actively rejecting or isolating the underachieving gifted child. On closer inspection the reciprocal interpersonal pattern becomes more apparent. The gifted child participates in provoking the rejection, develops a kind of pseudo-self-sufficiency and denies responsibility for the rejecting behavior of others.

**Planning and Implementing an Intervention Program**

A basic position on constructive intervention has been presented elsewhere (Fine & Walkenshaw, 1977), and expresses the theme that the more the child is out of control, the more there is a need for external control. Intervention is conceived as a patterning and weaning process whereby a more appropriate pattern of behavior is established, and where the child is subsequently permitted greater increments of self-management. The goal of any therapeutic intervention is essentially to reduce the disturbing symptoms and to foster the child's capacity to be in control of his own life in ways that will serve his best interests. Giving a great deal of freedom to a child who is immature, impulsive, and into avoiding responsibility does not make sense. But denying a wide latitude of decision-making to children who are able to exercise reasonably good judgment also does not make sense.

The challenge of therapeutic intervention is to initially develop the necessary structure needed to support the child in acquiring a more appropriate behavior pattern and then to modify the structure in order for the child to assume progressively more responsibility for his/her behavior.

The following guidelines for intervention with underachieving gifted students were generated from these principles of intervention and the conception of the dynamics of underachievement. They stand as generalizations and may in the judgment of the reader be inappropriate for a given case. We have used these guidelines in a number of cases, however, and found them to represent a reasonably effective program of intervention.

1. Since the pattern of underachievement often has its genesis in the child's family relationships, the family needs to be involved in a collaborative fashion. While advocates of family therapy may recommend this treatment modality for almost all problems, we are mainly encouraging a close, working relationship between home and school.

2. The vehicle for family-school collaboration that is very useful is a series of meetings that include the parents, the teacher(s), the building administrator, possibly some consulting personnel such as the school psychologist, and the person responsible for the gifted program. Once again, strong believers in family therapy might want the other siblings to be present; this should remain a matter of judgment.

Given the manipulative qualities often found in underachieving gifted students, the bringing together of parents and teachers and child can help to clarify who said what.
what common goals need to be established, and how all concerned can work collaboratively. In effect the basis of a high confrontation-high accountability program is being developed.

3. While the child's involvement and participation in the meeting is invited, it is important that the parents and teachers establish a strong parental posture. This posture is characterized by a "we care, we are concerned, and we will do something" message to the child. This strong, "good parent" position is likely to be psychologically reassuring to the child, though on the social level, we can anticipate a negative reaction from the child.

4. The group meetings will parallel the family interactions or rituals and as such, we can expect existing family dynamics to reveal themselves. For example, if the parents are in conflict over what to do with the child, this conflict should surface.

Also the characteristic ways that the child manipulates his family should appear as the child attempts to manipulate the parent-teacher group. For example, the child might shift into an intellectualization of the problem and this might prompt other participants in the meeting to join the child. If caution and control are not exhibited by the others, the session can deteriorate into pursuing tangents, ignoring the main focus, and a general loss of purpose.

5. The issues, expectations and intervention plan need to be spelled out concretely. Often at such meetings people think they are communicating, only to later discover that different persons come away with different ideas.

A detailed set of procedures for negotiating a contract was presented in earlier publications (Fine, 1979; Fine & Walkenshaw, 1977). The essentials of the interview-contracting strategy are: (a) to introduce the purpose of the meeting in a nonpunitive, nonjudgmental way; (b) to elicit and clarify the different views and feelings of the persons present; (c) to constructively confront divergent views as deemed necessary in an attempt to mutualize reality for all present; (d) to identify and process available options; and (e) to decide in concrete terms a course of action that elaborates expectations; who will do what, kinds of record keeping, and, importantly, the timetable for future meetings.

6. Follow-up conferences involving the same people are vital in order to maintain the high confrontation-high accountability nature of the intervention. As soon as interest wanes and people miss meetings, we can expect the child to regress in terms of progress made.

Our experience with these conferences is that the persons involved are highly motivated to have the first and possibly second meetings. But the tendency once a plan has been formulated is for "busy" people to pull away from involvement. The probability that the intervention plan will fail increases, it seems, proportionate to the absence of the original members of the first meeting.

Each follow-up session is an opportunity to monitor the child's progress, evaluate and modify the program, increase the child's involvement in decision-making, and offer the child praise, encouragement, and reinforcement for his progress. The interview procedure briefly outlined is a useful vehicle for reviewing progress and deciding on modifications.

7. The intervention program is more likely to succeed if one person is in charge. Being in charge means that the person understands the dynamics of underachievement, understands the importance of the high confrontation-high accountability program, has the group skills to coordinate the participation in the sessions, and has the skills and capability of confronting the other persons as their interest and attendance diminishes.

Being in charge often occurs implicitly as the others recognize a given person's expertise. It seems appropriate to make explicit that a given person will assume responsibility for scheduling the sessions and chairing the meetings. This will tend to reduce power struggles among the group participants and keep the group on task.

8. Sabotages need to be expected, confronted, and headed off if possible. This may sound like a negative and unnecessary statement but our experience is that recognition of the prospect of sabotage is crucial to the success of the program. For example, one parent may identify with the child as a victim of these "bad" people. That parent may reduce his/her expectations for the child, implicitly or even explicitly discount the intervention program, and in other ways reinforce the child's nonachieving behavior.

Another example of sabotage can occur when one of the teachers involved does not accept the premise and procedures of the intervention. The teacher might send reverse messages to the child about his/her expectations, might refuse to keep records as earlier agreed upon, and in other ways might attempt to undermine the potency of the intervention program.

The prospect of sabotage is an important reason for one individual to be explicitly in charge of coordinating the program. In this way, the coordination can maintain informal contracts with the parent and educational personnel and trouble-shoot the program before a major breakdown occurs.

Summary

This paper has presented a rationale and set of strategies for assisting underachieving gifted children toward greater academic attainment. The framework tended to be holistic in the sense of recognizing that the pattern of underachievement has to do not only with the child's psychological make-up but also ties in with family and school relationships. Therefore, the intervention program needs to involve parents, teachers, and the child with the emphasis on the development of a strong "good parent" structure. Someone other than the child has to be in charge since
the child has clearly demonstrated that he/she is not working to his or her own best interest.

The high confrontation-high accountability program being advocated requires the continued and active involvement of parents and teachers; as progress is evident, the child is invited into a more active role on his/her own behalf.

The literature has made it abundantly clear that the underachieving gifted child is often more than just a child bored with a mundane school experience. Also the pattern of underachievement can become pervasive and diminish not only the child's school satisfaction but have a serious and negative impact on peer-social relationships and the child's place within the family.

References


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