Mentors for Gifted Underachieving Males: Developing Potential and Realizing Promise

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ABSTRACT

The literature focusing on mentorships and underachieving gifted young men is almost nonexistent. To address this need, the researchers examined the mentorship experiences of three students who characterized various aspects of giftedness and underachievement in males. The findings of the study revealed a single core category with three attendant subcategories. The influence of a significant adult on a young person was the dominant category. Several related subcategories reinforced the importance of the mentor: mentors’ open-minded and nonjudgmental characteristics; consistent and personalized social/emotional support and advocacy; and strength and interest-based strategies for intervention to reverse underachievement. These results underscore the critical effectiveness of mentorships on underachievement, regardless of age, environment, and socioeconomic background. Implications of the findings are presented that highlight the successful features of the mentor-protégé relationship.

Mentorships have historically been viewed as one avenue to the acquisition of knowledge and perfection of skill among child prodigies. Spontaneous mentorships arise naturally when adult experts recognize strong potential and motivation in individuals with whom they share common interests. The experts then take the protégés under their tutelage, offering protection, nurturance, and guidance while the prodigies work to fulfill their potential. Seminal studies in the field of gifted education have noted the frequent presence of mentors in the lives of highly successful, eminent people (Torrance, 1984; Kaufman, Harrel, Milam, Woolverton, & Miller, 1986) and have captured the attention of educators searching for effective strategies to develop the talents of special populations of students.

Increasingly, evidence exists that gifted young men are at special risk for developing academic and social problems that include serious academic and behavioral problems, self-iden-
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tity and self-esteem concerns, and even denial of talent (Alvino, 1991; Ford, 1996; Hébert, 1997; Olenchak, 1995; Seeley, 1993). Thanks to numerous research studies, professionals have uncovered some factors contributing to underachievement among gifted youth (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995; Ford, 1993; Frasier, Passow, & Goldberg, 1958; Rimm, 1986; Whitmore, 1980); but, there remains limited and inconclusive research on effective strategies for reversing it.

Previous research has examined the effects of family counseling (Colangelo & Peterson, 1993; Silverman, 1993), educational interventions (Emerick, 1992; Lemley, 1994; Rimm & Olenchak, 1991; Scruggs & Cohn, 1983; Whitmore, 1980), and using behavior management techniques (Rimm, 1986). In addition, examinations have been conducted of underachievement interventions among students with learning, behavioral, and developmental differences (Baum, Olenchak, & Owen, 1998; Olenchak, 1995).

The literature contains relatively few studies, however, that have examined the role of a mentor relationship in reversing patterns of underachievement (Clasen, 1993). Although gifted students collectively are likely to attract mentors on their own, several subpopulations of gifted students, including underachievers, do not experience this advantage. Arnold and Subotnik (1995) asserted that the gifted youngster’s talent and motivation alone are not enough to attract a prospective mentor. They indicated that the closer the protégé’s gender, social class, ethnicity, experiential background, values, and attitudes match those of the mentor, the more likely the child will find the status and lifestyle of the professional attractive and the mentor will be interested in the young person. This scenario poses a problem for disadvantaged, minority, or underachieving gifted young people who often are less likely to reflect socioeconomic characteristics similar to those of potential mentors (White-Hood, 1993; Wright & Borland, 1992). As a result, they are often overlooked.

Aside from the dichotomous personal and socioeconomic characteristics of the mentor and protégé, several studies of formal mentorships cite demonstrated task commitment as one of the primary criteria for selection as a protégé (Edlind & Haensly, 1985; Goh & Goh, 1996; Reilly, 1992). The importance of this criterion is understandable, considering that most mentorship programs utilize professionals from the community as mentors. Such professionals are apt to lead busy lives and have difficulty finding time for their protégés. Coordinators of mentor programs recognize this sacrifice and often select those young people who have demonstrated a high degree of commitment to task to ensure that the mentor’s time will not be wasted.

Despite the body of research examining mentor-protégé relationships, studies that have explicitly explored mentorships as interventions for underachievement among high-ability students are limited (Noller & Frey, 1994); those that have examined this issue among high-ability males are virtually nonexistent (Clasen & Clasen, 1997). Although mentorships have been examined broadly without regard to gender (Flaxman, Ascher, & Harrington, 1988; Reilly, 1992; Torrance, 1984), Levinson and colleagues’ (1978) work specifically explored mentorships among males. Their impression of mentorship, based on interviews with 40 men, includes being a teacher, supporter, adviser, nurturer of skills and intelligence, guide, and model. Further, “the mentor has another function and this is developmentally the most crucial one: to support and facilitate the realization of the Dream” (p. 98), or the image that each young man has for his adulthood.

Flaxman, Ascher, and Harrington (1988) provided an even more apt perspective for mentorships involving young people: a supportive relationship between a youth or young adult and someone more senior in age and experience who offers support, guidance, and concrete assistance as the younger partner goes through a difficult period, enters a new area of experience, takes on an important task, or corrects an earlier problem. In general, during mentoring, protégés identify with, or form a strong interpersonal attachment to, their mentors; as a result, they become able to do for themselves what their mentors have done for them.

Torrance’s (1980, 1984) seminal study of mentor relationships presents conclusive evidence that mentorships have a significant impact on the creative achievements of gifted individuals. Reporting that having a mentor was a statistically significant factor in adult creative achievement for both men and women, Torrance’s 22-year longitudinal study strongly suggests that a critical component for facilitating achievement among economically disadvantaged youngsters is mentors (Torrance, Goff, & Satterfield, 1998).

In another seminal investigation, Kaufman et al. (1986) investigated the lives of 139 Presidential Scholars from 1964 to 1968 to determine the characteristics of spontaneous mentors and their influences on the lives of academically gifted young people. As a whole, the participants in this study valued the role model, support, and encouragement aspects of their mentorship far more than the professional interaction. Fifty-nine percent reported that they adopted some of the characteristics of their mentors, including their attitudes toward work, personal habits, or general outlook on life.

In another study, Shaughnessy and Neely (1991) also examined the attributes of effective mentors. Among the traits most frequently cited in their sample of academically gifted individuals were providing security, building confidence, and being enthusiastic and patient. Underscoring a relationship between traits and action, Ambrose, Allen and Huntley (1994)
found that successful mentors of gifted young people guided them through difficult times in their personal lives and were able to enhance their development and the likelihood that they would reach their potential.

Associated with mentorships is the incorporation of experiences that not only can transpire within the context of school, but also can be extended beyond the academic day. Heath and McLaughlin (1993) indicated that involvement in organizations beyond school provided opportunities for gifted youngsters to build a sense of self-efficacy and success in different events. These experiences enabled youth to construct positive perceptions of self and raise aspirations for the future. Halpern (1992) indicated that involvement in after-school programs offered young people structure and predictability that might be missing in their lives and an opportunity to learn something about the distinction in behavior required in settings outside their school environment. Moreover, such extracurricular experiences can often serve as forums in which young people can begin to develop deeper relationships with adults that are less likely to be complicated by academic expectations. As a result, out-of-school activities present opportunities for close mentorships to develop in a fashion that allows for personal growth of gifted youth that can be virtually free of any negative school-related attitudes.

Heath and McLaughlin (1993) noted that involvement in activities focusing on producing tangible products or performances reinforced this positive sense of self through building a sense of accomplishment and success within young people. The activities gave youth concrete evidence that something could be gained by sticking with an effort and provided opportunities for success. These experiences also taught the youngsters that choices matter, that effort can make a difference, and that some adults believe that what they do with their talents is important.

The value of cocurricular activities, those in which students extend the regular school program into related areas of study beyond the basic curriculum, was also highlighted in a longitudinal study of 200 talented teenagers. In this study, Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1997) reported that these experiences were the most likely school activities to engage youngsters fully in learning—the most consistent source of interest and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) for students. Such activities were important in alerting youngsters to the fact that important work was not always aversive and alienating. The researchers proposed that cocurricular activities combined feelings of spontaneous involvement with a focus on important goals and perceptions of high skill with correspondingly high challenges.

To enhance the understanding of the significance of mentorships in reversing the underachievement of gifted males, this article describes three case studies of high-ability young men and the mentors who had a critical impact on their lives. Following a discussion of the methodology, the case studies are presented, and implications across the studies are discussed.

Methods

To understand the experience of the young men described in this study, the investigators chose a comparative case study research design for qualitatively examining the intensive, holistic relationships and activities associated with the subjects (Merriam, 1998). The goal of the study was to examine the lives of three gifted young men and to understand how a significant adult engaged each subject in a relationship that ultimately reversed underachievement. Case studies are often used when attempting to answer “how” and “why” questions, such as those posed in this study (Yin, 1989): How did the mentor-protégé relationship develop, and why was the relationship successful in helping to reverse underachievement? Case studies are designed to investigate the interrelationships among a series of complex human variables within their real-life contexts (Yin, 1989). As a tool for inquiry, case studies enable researchers to understand complicated social phenomena, while retaining the holistic and meaningful characteristics of everyday events (Yin, 1993). They are particularly useful when the researcher needs to understand some specific group of people, particular problem, or unique situation in great depth. When the researcher can identify cases within this group, problem, or situation, case study research can yield valuable information (Patton, 1990; Stake, 1995).

Although ethnographic works depict persons, places, and events as they exist amidst the instability of real life, effort was made by the researchers to satisfy what Denzin (1997) called the quantitative investigator’s quest for “stable pictures of reality” (p. 45). One means for enhancing interpretations of single-subject ethnographic case studies is to increase the number and diversity of subjects to permit cross-study comparisons. However, despite these efforts at experimental research, such comparisons are more akin to matching photographs in a series of pictorial essays than they are like statistical comparisons (Denzin, 1997). When qualitative researchers examine a range of similar and contrasting cases, the inclusion of multiple illustrations enhances the external validity or generalizability of the researcher’s findings (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As a result, the researchers chose to apply single-subject ethnographic methods to a multiple case approach, thereby enhancing the potential for more global conclusions to be extracted from the data. The research described in this article involved three cases of gifted males who underachieved. The
names of the people, places, and institutions described were changed to protect the identities of the participants.

Selection of the Participants

The young men featured in this study, ranging from elementary-age through later adolescence, either had been formally identified for participation in special programming for gifted students or were being considered for those programs. Each of the three participants in the study was selected through purposeful sampling procedures to provide insight about gifted males across several developmental periods: early elementary years, early middle school years, and early collegiate years. The objective of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the research questions being investigated. “Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about the issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). More specifically, criterion sampling was implemented, whereby all cases had to meet some predetermined criterion of importance. The criteria for selecting the three participants were as follows: (1) the subjects were male; (2) each had been recognized or referred during his public school years for gifted characteristics (Davis & Rimm, 1994); and (3) each one was currently underachieving academically as reflected by a preponderance of grades of C or lower. Subjects in this study were located through field work in academic settings. Information from academic portfolios was used to validate their inclusion in this research.

Data Collection

A combination of semi-structured interviews and document review was used to gather data for this qualitative study. Along with transcribed interviews with the participants, the review of formal and informal documents, such as the students’ records and samples of their written work, provided a clearer picture of the school life experiences being examined. Six or more in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the gifted males featured in this article. Data were collected that encompassed individual interviews with their teachers, school counselors, advisors, and other professionals significant in their educational placements. These semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore a few general topics in order, not only to gain information directly from the participants, but also to develop insight on how the young men interpreted aspects of their school experiences. Through the interviews of the subjects themselves, a picture emerged of what each young man believed was happening, enabling each to tell his own story.

The following research questions guided the qualitative case studies:
1. How did the relationship between each subject and his mentor develop and endure?
2. What circumstances influenced patterns of underachievement among three intelligent young men?

Data Coding and Analysis

The transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed according to Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) three-stage process. The first stage consists of open coding, in which all transcribed interviews were read and analyzed line by line to generate initial categories. A second stage of coding then identified consistent themes and relationships in each of the three sources: student interviews, interviews with all other participants, and document review. After these general categories emerged, each source was reviewed once more to locate additional evidence in the data. Strauss and Corbin described this process as axial coding since it involves analysis to be focused individually around the axis of each category. A third stage, selective coding, then compared the general themes across all sources of data, identifying even broader, more consistent themes.

Following a description of the participants, a discussion of the findings is provided, and implications are discussed.

Results

Jackson

Twelve-year-old Jackson, a light-skinned African American fifth grader at a neighborhood elementary school in an industrialized suburb of a large Southern city, was referred to the researchers by the school principal, who expressed concern for him not only academically, but also socially. At first sullen and unwilling to talk unless directly asked a question, rapport quickly developed when one of the researchers leaped up and yelled, “Now, what do you suppose a honky like me has to offer you?” A smile cracked across Jackson’s face, followed by giggles more characteristic of a child several years his junior. Henceforth, communication between the researchers and Jackson was open and forthright.

Eldest of five children in a family receiving welfare, Jackson had significant challenges simply to sustain his life each day. When he was barely age 10, Jackson’s mother was sent to prison for burglary and repeated incidents of shoplifting; neither he nor his siblings knew their fathers. As a result, the children were legally placed with an 80-year-old grandmother who, as time went on, became increasingly afflicted
with arthritis. Forced to assume many of the duties his grandmother had previously handled, Jackson quickly became more like a surrogate parent than an older brother to his siblings. Among the most important of these obligations was “hawking” them, or making sure that each of his brothers and sisters was staying out of trouble. In a neighborhood of older, single-family residences, some of which have been abandoned and boarded up, tending to small children was more than a cursory assignment. A child himself, Jackson’s role appeared to be overwhelming, though he undertook it in stride and managed to find time to interact with other young males in the neighborhood. It was these relationships that most troubled the school principal.

Several weeks before meeting the research team, Jackson had been caught trespassing in an abandoned warehouse a few blocks from his grandmother’s home. The warehouse, known for serving as a meeting site for several youth gangs, had also been the scene of a gang-related murder only a year before. Though it could not be confirmed, Jackson’s popularity with his peers led the school principal to surmise that Jackson was being courted by at least one of the gangs. Moreover, having been retained in first grade for failure to achieve the competencies requisite for promotion, Jackson continued to experience academic problems in all areas. In fourth grade, his teacher referred him for screening for behavior disorders, but he did not qualify behaviorally, despite his tendency to be withdrawn with adults. Instead, the battery of tests revealed that Jackson actually possessed nonverbal ability ranking well into the superior range. Although at times Jackson refused to complete his school assignments, teachers felt it was because he often seemed overtired to the point of exhaustion. In fact, a developing history of truancy and tardiness was attributed by the principal to Jackson’s significant responsibilities for his brothers, sisters, and grandmother. Visits to Jackson’s home by social service agents revealed that, despite the grandmother’s condition and age, the family was functioning fairly well, though “the oldest son [Jackson] has many more chores than children his age should have.”

Intervention. With the support of the school, a weekly 45-minute support group session was developed for Jackson and five other young men with similar profiles: from economically impoverished backgrounds, a history of academic problems, and either already involved in gangs or considered susceptible to such involvement. Aimed at providing each participant with a forum for discussion of topics of interest to them, as well as instruction in an array of problem resolution strategies, each meeting of the group opened with each participant sharing brief descriptions of one or two positive and one or two negative events from the preceding week. Early on, the group members were administered a locally designed interest inventory. Jackson’s interests clustered around the sciences, mathematics, and spatial activities like building, designing, and manipulating objects. Thereafter, every member of the group was paired with one or more mentors specializing in an appropriate area of interest, and efforts were made to ensure compatibility through a series of interest-related outings involving each group member and his mentor, as well as one of the researchers. For Jackson, a day-long weekend visit to a NASA museum, an afternoon at a university science laboratory, and a hands-on session in a commercial design business served both to solidify the relationship with his mentor, and to acquaint him with career opportunities.

Meanwhile, specific curricular adaptations were undertaken to alter Jackson’s school program. Using funding for remedial education, the school district provided 50 of its teachers, who taught students who were particularly at risk of school failure (including Jackson’s), with training in talent development techniques and problem-solving approaches. Specifically, teachers learned ways to compact time spent on basic skills where mastery could be documented with less drill and practice. They learned strategies gauged to emphasize student strengths while de-emphasizing weaknesses and ways to differentiate curriculum. In addition, the teachers were trained not only in the problem-solving and decision-making heuristics inherent in level I of the CoRT Thinking Skills Program (deBono, 1986), but they also were taught how to integrate them into day-to-day academic content. In the case of each of the six members of the special group, teachers agreed to be monitored in their implementation of the enrichment and problem-solving strategies. Monitoring included lesson plans teachers maintained, unannounced observations by the research team, and evaluation-linked scrutiny by the principal, who was also trained in the curriculum alteration procedures.

To arrange for and monitor efforts to personalize his curriculum, Jackson’s teacher scheduled meetings with him every six weeks, held additional meetings as needed along with the mentor, and maintained a daily journal thoroughly capturing reflections about activities in which Jackson participated, his reactions, and the relationships with teachers, peers, and family. Each meeting produced a contract for material and skills he had to master in each major content field and interest-based activities in which Jackson could engage once he had demonstrated mastery. Of critical importance before the first contract, Jackson’s mentor arranged a luncheon where Jackson was introduced to an African American attorney who explained the nature of contracts, what they mean, how they are handled, and the penalties for violation. Afterward, Jackson met again with his teacher to make sure that he understood the seriousness of the contracts in which he was going to become a partner.
Findings. After the first six weeks, Jackson discussed with both his teacher and the mentor his feelings about the potential for his personally tailored program:

I just can’t think y’all would do anything like this. I mean, you know, that I’m just a boy from the ‘hood and I think it’s hot. I get to do experiments and hot stuff, but it’s like that lawman called a contract that if I violate it I might as well go to jail. The difference is I don’t have to sign, but if I don’t, I don’t get to work on experiments. . . . The contract lets me move out of the school’s stuff fast if I want to.

During that first six-week period, his teacher held almost daily meetings with Jackson to sustain his interest and commitment to the contract he had signed. He not only successfully accomplished his required assignments, he found that he had sufficiently compacted his curriculum in math and in science to permit undertaking a study of space. Although his mentor was not a space specialist, he facilitated access to a teacher at a nearby high school who had once held a position as a NASA Space Camp instructor. His teacher’s journal entry after the third meeting with the mentor and former NASA instructor captured the essence of a metamorphosis:

I can’t believe that this is happening so fast! Jackson walked into the classroom this morning and was actually toting a book that he was protecting! The book was one on space from NASA. He asked me if I would make a safe place for him to keep his space materials so that they didn’t get lost because he really had no place at home. This is more interest than any teacher has ever seen from Jackson since he walked in the door in Head Start. I am stunned.

As days passed, Jackson never agreed to sign a contract unless he felt he could adhere to it. Over an academic year, he declined signing only once, during the third six-week period when Jackson pronounced the proposed contract was “too much work right now. Let’s change it so that there’s not so much.” When he was reminded that the time he could earn for his space study would have to be reduced if he spent more time completing basic requirements, he expressed appreciation for the fact he was in charge of the pacing of his educational program: “I forget that I be in charge of my schoolin’ now.” Thereafter, a more diligent effort was undertaken to involve Jackson in even the earliest development of each contract. This allowed the young man to see exactly which basic skills and content material were required and which assignments were needed to demonstrate mastery.

Occasionally, Jackson’s own comments, as well as those from his teacher’s journal, indicated that, as might have been predicted, commitment fluctuated. Shortly before the end of the first semester, Jackson told his mentor:

I’m about done on this. It’s work, work, work, and like it’s too much. I’ve been reading late, and my granny wants me to be asleep. So, I hide under the blanket, and she thinks I’m asleep. What a game! I’m tired and don’t think this is as fun . . . there’s all that work just so I can have time for [my] space [project].

However, the mentor and teacher remained supportive throughout the year. The teacher’s journal entry made the same day Jackson expressed his frustration indicated her own wavering commitment, yet willingness to persevere:

Jackson is feeling the pressure of what it means to use one’s abilities. He is tired and angry that school can’t be totally his own way, that work is required in addition to the space interest. After talking about this with Bob [his mentor], I sat down with Jackson during lunch, and we talked about what we could do to make it better. We agreed that his space work could also be done during lunch and recess, but that he’d have to be in charge of himself in my classroom. Mrs. Lewis [the principal] told him that if he made just one mistake when he was using this time, he’d lose it forever. Jackson then told her it had to be in the contract in order to be the law, so we renegotiated the contract and built this in. He is smart!!

By the time school resumed after the winter vacation, Jackson and Bob had developed a plan for building his own telescope, only part of which was from a kit; the former NASA instructor would supervise mostly from afar but, on occasion, would meet one-to-one with Jackson. Using the time he had freed from the basic curriculum, as well as that contracted from lunches and recesses, Jackson made significant headway on his telescope and had even worked with an optics expert on grinding the lenses for it.

There was also evidence that other aspects of the intervention plan were having a meaningful impact on Jackson’s life. One day on his way home after school, just before spring vacation and the unveiling of his completed telescope, Jackson was approached by some gang members. Threatening him, Jackson told them that he was going to form his own gang, but it would be a different gang—one that was going to learn all about space so that every member could one day take shuttle trips to other planets. They laughed and teased him, but they left. Making specific reference to one of the problem resolution skills on which teachers were concentrating in his intervention, Jackson later related the encounter to his mentor:

You know, I was scared they’d draft me, but I used that CoRT from school. I used, you know, CAF [Consider All Factors] and OPV [Other Points of View], and I was thinking that they’d laugh at me if I sound like a space person . . . they think I am crazy. That’s okay; gangs leave crazies alone.

By the end of the school year, Jackson had not only utilized his telescope to begin tracking various stars and planets, but with assistance from Bob and the teacher, he had founded a space club for other students in the school. With nearly a dozen members meeting at lunch each Wednesday, the group also had met three nights under the watchful eyes of the mentor, the high school teacher who had been a Space Camp instructor, and Jackson’s own teacher. Her final journal entry for the year set the stage for later interventions:

Jackson is going off to Carver [middle school] next year. He has made such great headway that I can’t let him fall. Bob, Mrs. Lewis, and I have already arranged for the counselor over there and the school’s new enrichment teacher to work with Jackson and set up a new mentorship in the same way we have . . . they need to keep him going . . . The principal has already built in Jackson’s space club as one of the middle school mini-courses in the school’s schedule, so I think it’s going to be real follow-through. He is too bright to be squandered to the streets.
Nathan

Nathan’s expressive dark eyes, stocky build, and trendy attire made him typical of his environment. He came from an intact family residing in the suburbs of a large East Coast city. The younger of two children, at age eight, Nathan lived in a small, but tidy brick bungalow with his older sister, Carol, and both parents. His mother, a nurse, traveled among several medical facilities, while his father, a commercial seaman, was frequently away on shipping assignments to other nations.

From the start of his life, Nathan seemed destined to live in Carol’s shadow. Carol was identified early for participation in the school district’s gifted program, had maintained outstanding scholastic and behavioral performance all through school, and had accelerated one grade level after completing third grade. As a result, at age 13, Carol was enrolled as a freshman at a nearby high school, was participating with distinction in a rigorous precollegiate curriculum, and had earned critical acclaim for her piano debut with a suburban symphony orchestra. In contrast, Nathan’s mother said in reference to her son, “I always hold my breath when I am paged to the phone at work. I just know that Nate has done something else.”

Upon meeting the researchers, Nathan refused to be seated, but was communicative. Nathan explained that, “Sitting down makes me look like I choose to be here, and I do not! This must be another third-degree inquiry or something.” An examination of his school records revealed a hefty file of disciplinary infractions; virtually all of the disciplinary actions were related either to calling out, talking too much, or acting out behaviors. A review of referrals and testing showed that, on two occasions Nathan had been referred for special services for students with learning and behavior disorders. Results did not indicate qualification for special educational services either time, and ability and aptitude testing indicated an uncooperative client for whom test results were believed to be unrepresentative. At that, it was noted anecdotally that Nathan placed in the upper ranges of average ability, though his verbal skills were consistently superior. Moreover, Nathan’s school records indicated that he always managed to salvage his academic work, as well as his behavioral problems just enough to avoid grade retention.

Intervention. Working with Sue, Nathan’s third-grade teacher, at the beginning of the academic year, the researchers developed a plan to accentuate the student’s obvious verbal strengths while de-emphasizing his tendency to talk out of turn and act out. Believing that at least part of Nathan’s concern might have been related to his sister’s seeming stardom, the teacher was most willing to work with the young man’s parents to design a well-orchestrated program to develop Nathan’s abilities. The plan, based on research about the importance of student interests in developing talent (Emerick, 1992), was aimed at identifying areas that appealed to Nathan and then imbedding those in his day-to-day curriculum. It was hoped that he might eventually develop enough enthusiasm to produce a high-quality project.

Using an interest inventory, Sue found that Nathan was intrigued about a number of topics that perhaps had been overlooked by both his school and family. When asked “What is the most interesting place you ever visited?” he quickly responded with sophisticated oratory:

That’s easy; I have a tie. First, I was astounded when we first went downtown to The Smithsonian. I was five, and I liked it all, but I was especially amazed by the displays at the Museum of American History. Since then, I have been back to the MAH—that’s what I call it now because I feel like the Museum and I are best friends—lots of times. Second, I was just as interested in the Gettysburg Battlefield when we went there last year. Both places have caused me to collect books and tapes on American history, and I like to sit alone in my room reading and watching information about every part of our country. Did you know that Benjamin Banneker was the first man to build a clock in this country, and he took over the design of Washington after Mr. L’Enfant was fired? And he was Afro-American!

Convinced that Nathan was deeply committed to history, Sue elected to halt the interest assessment at that point. Enlisting the support of his parents and the principal, Sue held a meeting where Nathan was present to discuss openly opportunities available to him were he to refrain from disrupting class for others. A detailed discussion ensued, as summarized in the thorough journal Sue maintained about Nathan and his emerging program:

We all agreed that Nathan’s interest in history, especially American history with special interest in African American history, was one that had strong appeal. Nathan was adamant that, if school would allow him time to work on his interest instead of spending time only on the basics, he would be able to control himself. Although both his mom and dad and I remain skeptical, we decided that I should adjust curriculum so that history could be built in more often. Nathan assured us he would “be good.”

During the next few weeks after the initial meeting, Sue had to remind Nathan occasionally about the agreement. Each time, he quickly acceded to the prompting, but Sue wondered if the intervention was going to work:

Would another day at the salt mines! Nathan may drive me and himself mad! I had to remind him 17 times today to be quiet and to do whatever he was supposed to be doing. Once he was singing a song he had made up about the Civil War and slavery—it was almost a dirge he was so sad. His neighbors kept telling him to shut up, and finally I had to intervene by separating him to the carrel for a few minutes. I reminded him repeatedly of his agreement, and he reminded me that we needed to find more time for him to study his history.

Over the next several weeks, Sue, working with the research team as facilitators, contacted a professor of African American history at a nearby university, who referred Sue to one of her undergraduate students, Amman. Amman agreed to work with Nathan on a regular basis once each week at a mutually convenient time, and Nathan’s parents resolved to
arrange for Nathan and Amman to meet at least one additional time each week during nonschool hours. Henceforth, Sue and Amman worked together to integrate facets of African American history into virtually every portion of the curriculum. This allowed Nathan to identify his interests in African American history in many aspects of the classroom program. Further, with the assistance of the researchers, Sue worked with the school’s gifted education teacher to arrange an interview to determine whether Nathan’s interest could develop into a guided study. Nathan was quick to identify exactly the direction of his project:

Hey, you mean I can make a movie of my own for kids my age? I want to write, design, and direct a video production about famous African Americans in the U.S.A. and how they have had a major impact on our history. After I write it, all I need to do is figure out how to get some of the other kids to star in it. Do you think we could advertise it and show it to grown-ups, too?

Findings. Although Nathan’s overall behavior and academic success wavered, he largely sustained his commitment to both his project and controlling his behavior. The school principal met with Nathan for counseling infrequently, but most of his success was attributable to the curricular alterations and the work with Amman. Nathan described his improved situation as follows:

It has been difficult for me to keep my end of the bargain. I have had to bite my tongue a lot in class because I need to tell everyone what I think and what I feel. But, my teacher has really made school interesting for me. It is like whatever Amman and I are doing on my movie ends up in my class, and then everybody ends up talking about the topics I am studying to put into my script. This has really helped me. Oh, I’m not perfect, but my sister, Carol, has congratulated me on my success. She even told me that she can’t wait to see my movie!

While the school year concluded before Nathan’s film could be completed, all of the adults involved in Nathan’s plan, as well as the teacher with whom Nathan will work next school year, have met. They delineated a detailed plan for continuing to integrate African American history with the general curriculum, and they revised Nathan’s proposal for completing his film. Barring any unforeseen obstacles, Nathan is planning the premiere of his film by the middle of his fourth-grade year. In assessing the intervention, Sue’s journal concluded:

Anything was worth a shot! I am thrilled at the progress Nathan has made. Not only are his overall grades up to above average, he has qualified for the gifted program. He has not been sent to the office at all since Christmas, and the other kids all want to know what part they can play in his movie. From now on, he won’t ever have to find the attention he deserves by calling out and disrupting.

Stephen

As Stephen sat in his college advisor’s office, he explained his problem to Dr. Kirkland, a new professor in the College of Education assigned to him for academic counseling. With nervousness reflected in his voice, Stephen explained he had been involved in dormitory pranks with other freshman males, and the good times had gotten him into some trouble academically. Previously at his suburban high school, Stephen had achieved a strong, academic, athletic, and extracurricular record replete with excellent grades in advanced placement courses. Nicknamed “the Viking” throughout his high school years, Stephen’s Scandinavian features indicated his Norwegian descent.

Stephen came to the university from an upper-middle-class community in the South whose industrial base was centered around the space industry and depended on major contracts from NASA. The technological orientation of the community was reflected in the school district’s curriculum, and Stephen explained that his peer group had been high-pow- ered academic achievers all through school, many of them pursuing intellectually challenging math and science courses at an early age. Stephen’s mother, a single parent with 2 children, worked for the space industry as a computer software designer. Often referring to himself as “the man of the house,” Stephen explained that his parents had divorced when he was two years old, and his father had not been a part of his life since. Stephen’s older sister, three years his senior and with whom he was close, was in her final year of an undergraduate program in zoology at a neighboring institution in the South and was planning on applying to medical school following her graduation.

With embarrassment, he explained that his first semester grade point average was a pitiful 1.6 and that he was dissatisfied with his performance. He also indicated that he was no longer involved in sports and had not been lifting weights, something he had done religiously throughout high school. Overwhelmed by his rather lackluster beginning as a college student, he turned to his advisor for help.

During their initial meeting, Dr. Kirkland could see that Stephen was troubled by his academic underachievement as a college freshman. At that time, Dr. Kirkland sensed that Stephen’s high school years, during which he had excelled athletically and academically, had been very important to him. Facing such a dismal beginning as a freshman appeared to be overwhelming to the young man, who suddenly saw himself as just “another small fish in a big pond.” As Dr. Kirkland and Stephen chatted about his academic and athletic success in high school, his advisor shared with Stephen one of his research projects. For his examination of successful coaches of scholar-athletes, Dr. Kirkland explained he needed help with a review of literature that he was writing and asked Stephen if he would be willing to assist with library searches to locate research articles on this topic. Stephen explained that he had benefited from a healthy coach-athlete relationship with his football coach in high school, and he was pleased to assist his new advisor with
the research. Stephen agreed to spend some time in the university’s sport studies library working for his new advisor. Following arrangements with the library’s director, Stephen went to work for Dr. Kirkland.

**Intervention.** Dr. Kirkland explained to Stephen that he wanted to meet with him on a weekly basis to discuss the research articles he was able to obtain. He would look forward to their weekly sessions since whatever literature Stephen might uncover would be a great help to the research professor. Dr. Kirkland was also honest with Stephen as he explained he had other motives. He wanted to be able to stay in touch with his new advisee to check his academic efforts on a weekly basis and provide any support he could for the very capable student. Stephen agreed that this seemed like a good plan for him. The following week, they met for lunch at the student union, reviewed the journal articles Stephen had uncovered, and discussed his events of the week. Dr. Kirkland informed Stephen that he would be contacting his mother to explain the plan they had agreed on as a strategy for getting Stephen “back on track” academically. Stephen’s mother was delighted to hear from Dr. Kirkland and approved of his plan to reverse Stephen’s underachievement.

During their weekly meetings, Stephen and his advisor arrived at an important conclusion concerning why Stephen had failed academically during his first semester. Stephen reflected on how much busier he had been during high school with his heavy load of advanced placement courses and involvement in the high school band and several varsity sports. The busier he was, the better he was at managing his time. The unstructured time in the dormitory was apparently an aspect of collegiate life that Stephen was not able to handle.

As part of his academic advising, Dr. Kirkland agreed to Stephen’s enrollment in an innovative electronic music class that was being offered at the university for the first time. Stephen had explained that the music course would serve as a creative outlet that he had been missing since his high school band experience. Although Dr. Kirkland hesitated about enrolling Stephen in a course that was not part of his undergraduate core requirements, he realized that such an experience might help Stephen feel better about his abilities.

The following August, Stephen gladly reported he was not living in the dormitory during his sophomore year; he and a friend were renting a small apartment on campus, which he felt would provide a quieter environment for serious study. Again, Stephen and his advisor mapped out a plan for keeping him on track academically. The two men agreed that Stephen would benefit from a part-time job on campus, and Dr. Kirkland suggested a lifeguard position at the university recreation center. Realizing that athletics had been such an important part of Stephen’s high school experience, Dr. Kirkland was delighted to hear that Stephen was also planning on getting involved with the university’s rugby team and encouraged him to try out. Although the research project from the previous year was completed, the two men agreed that staying in touch on a weekly basis would help keep Stephen focused academically.

**Findings.** The role as research assistant to Dr. Kirkland, coupled with the weekly meetings with his mentor, helped pave the way for continuing reversal of underachievement. The electronic music course also proved to be an appropriate complement; Stephen enjoyed the instructor tremendously, he discovered a new peer group that shared his passion for electronic rock music, and he achieved a grade of A in a challenging course. Dr. Kirkland celebrated Stephen’s success in the course by attending a culminating concert in which the course participants performed original electronic music. Along with his success in the electronic music class, Stephen made tremendous progress during his second semester, raising his grade point average to a respectable level. Describing the successes he experienced during that second semester, Stephen said:

I think the biggest thing for me was walking into his office my freshman year, knowing that I had screwed up my grades, and seeing that he was there listening to me. I felt that I needed a second chance, and I knew that I could work hard. I knew that I had to bring up my grades. He listened to me and told me that he believed in me and told me that I was going to be able to do it. That really gave me a push and the motivation to achieve. He emphasized several points—that I was a freshman in college, a large university, a new place for me, and I needed some time to get the partying out of my system. He told me I wasn’t the first bright young man who had been distracted from studying during his first semester in college. I guess I was feeling so low that day, and somehow he focused on the positive. Dr. Kirkland also showed me that he was also concerned about other things about me outside of the academics. He wanted to know how my family was doing, what kind of extracurricular activities I was involved in, and what I liked to do for fun, what my life was all about. He didn’t just focus on which courses I should select for the semester. He was interested in me as a whole person. I was very intimidated when I first came to the office. I guess there was a sense of shame on my part. All I had to share with him that day was that I had been put on academic probation. It was an embarrassing thing. His telling me that he believed in me made me feel that I couldn’t let him down.

The combination of a new housing arrangement, a part-time job, and his involvement on the rugby team also appeared to make a difference. Since he worked as a lifeguard early in the morning his sophomore year, he found that his time spent at the swimming pool allowed him additional opportunity to study “on the job.” The rugby team gave him the athletic outlet he needed along with a new circle of friends. Stephen also found time to get involved with a small group of musicians from his apartment complex who planned to form a rock band. Despite the fact that fall semester of his sophomore year was very busy for him, he was successful at managing his time more carefully because he had established a serious study schedule and continued to improve his grades.
Dr. Kirkland continued to meet weekly with Stephen and was pleased to hear about his success as he reversed his pattern of underachievement. He helped Stephen to see how much more confident he appeared to be, noting that he had begun to develop dating relationships with several young women. Stephen also indicated that his success in his education major was making a difference; further, he was enjoying his clinical experiences in local public school classrooms working with young children. The time spent working with elementary school youngsters was similar to the positive experience he had found working with children as a lifeguard at the water slide in his hometown. These confidence-building experiences assured him that his change of major had been right for him.

Due to changes in Stephen’s family situation, it became necessary for him to change universities after the first semester of his junior year. Though he hated to leave his new friends and his new rock band that was successful in “landing gigs at frat houses,” Stephen felt good about his accomplishments since the dismal spring semester of his freshman year. With a B average, he was grateful to Dr. Kirkland for his supportive mentorship and, even more importantly, his friendship. As he left campus, he visited his advisor’s office one last time and promised to send Dr. Kirkland the first invitation to his commencement ceremony at the University of Utah. Not long thereafter, Dr. Kirkland shared a letter from Stephen with the researchers containing the following excerpt:

There was always something more that made me feel we had a friendship rather than just a student-mentor relationship. We had a comfortable relationship. You believed in me from the beginning. You weren’t just trying to cheer me up and make me feel better. You believed in me from the beginning, from day one. I picked up on that right away. I appreciated what you were doing for me. You were always checking in with me to see that things were okay. Not just in my classes, but other things outside of school, like my social life and whether I was meeting new people and making new friends. You were concerned about my development as a person. Just knowing that there was a person out there who cared about me is important to me. I’ll be honest, every time I hear that someone has a doctorate, that’s pretty intimidating to me. To have someone at that level listening to me and telling me that he believed in me and telling me he knew that I could do it really made me feel good.

Discussion and Implications

Based on the findings revealed in each case, a single core category emerged: the influence of a significant adult on a young person. There were, however, several related subcategories. First, the open-minded and nonjudgmental characteristics of the mentor were required to sustain an ongoing relationship. Second, as a natural quality of a caring adult friend, each mentor provided his protégé with consistent and personalized social/emotional support and advocacy beyond that associated with simple instructor-student relationships. Finally, a plan of strength and interest-based strategies for intervention to reverse patterns of underachievement was implemented successfully in each case.

Corroborating Torrance’s (1984) investigation, the mentor relationship experienced by the three young men described in this study revealed that each matured socially and emotionally, becoming a colleague of an accepting adult who cared about him as an individual. In each case, the significant adult was a man who helped the young person contemplate the barricades to his creative productivity and then to develop appropriate plans and strategies for leaping those hurdles.

It is interesting to note that each mentor experienced substantial growth himself. In the case of Jackson, the mentor was willing to learn about the trials and tribulations confronting urban youth in poor neighborhoods. Similarly, Nathan’s mentor, Amman, was willing to expand his repertoire of skills from African American history to pedagogical techniques appropriate for a child. And the college professor was willing to set his typical academic obligations aside to monitor his protégé’s progress. Paralleling Torrance’s (1984) findings, each mentor in the present investigation developed an association with his protégé that “was a deeper and more caring one than coach and sponsor relationship” (p. 8).

Another important implication of this study also parallels the longitudinal work of Torrance (1984) in which his subjects reported that they “saw their mentors as teaching them ‘how to play the game’” (p. 10). For Jackson, this instruction equated to persevering academically in order to free school time and also allow him the opportunity beyond school for his studies of space and astronomy. Amman taught Nathan how to use his interests in the struggles of African Americans throughout history as a means for becoming enthused about school and uncovering hidden talents in film production. Dr. Kirkland taught Stephen “how to play the game” by keeping busier to maintain his focus and encourage him to use his time more productively.

Unlike previous results, the present case studies reveal that school personnel were pivotal in helping to establish mentorships for the young subjects. Without purposeful intervention in designing these matches, the mentor relationships could not have developed. The cases reinforce the notion that parents are often so overwhelmed with their own circumstances that they are unable to provide such opportunities. Moreover, parents often lack the contacts for locating appropriate mentors in a community.

The importance of the mentor as advocate or as spokesman for each young man was prevalent in all three cases. Bob, Jackson’s mentor, met frequently with school personnel to monitor his academic progress and to ensure that he had...
adequate contact with the NASA instructor for developing his space project and founding his space club. Amman made sure that Nathan had sufficient opportunities for building connections from African American history to the regular content in his classroom. Dr. Kirkland spoke in Stephen’s behalf when he was forced to miss numerous classes due to mononucleosis.

Focusing on personal strengths and interests was found to be effective in helping each young subject improve his motivation, self-regulation, and academic efforts. These results underscore Renzulli’s (1994) recommendations for talent development. Across the three case studies, each young man discovered how his interest could be connected to his academic responsibilities. Whether it was Jackson’s interest in space, Nathan’s fascination with African American history, or Stephen’s passion for electronic music, each young man began to see a link between his personal desires and traditional academic expectations. This realization produced improved school behavior and academic achievement in all three subjects.

Jackson and Nathan each experienced improved relationships with peers, while Stephen expanded the range and quality of peer interactions. Jackson realized that a positive peer group need not be a street gang, but could be a collection of students interested in a space club. Nathan suddenly became popular because his interest in producing a movie about African American history prompted his peers to seek his approval for their participation. Meanwhile, Stephen developed much stronger and richer friendships based not on dormitory pranks, but on mutual interests and values. These results highlight the findings of Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert (1995) where students made friends with peers who achieved academically and shared common interests.

Supporting the findings of several previous studies (Emerick, 1992; Hébert, 1997; Olenchak, 1995; Reilly, 1992; Torrance, 1984), the current investigation revealed that the mentor in each case genuinely cared for his protégé, believed in him, and appreciated and respected him as a unique individual with special talents and abilities beyond the academic tasks at hand. In every case study, the mentor could see beyond the underachieving behaviors to focus on the strengths of the protégé.

Ultimately, this study has indicated that mentor relationships can be effective in reversing the pattern of underachievement in gifted young men. Regardless of age, socioeconomic background, and environment, the mentorship approach was successful in discerning personal interests and in nurturing strengths in the young men. Educators and other professionals must purposefully seek to encourage relationships between caring adults and talented young men who are underachieving. To do otherwise is to obscure potential and promise.

References


