

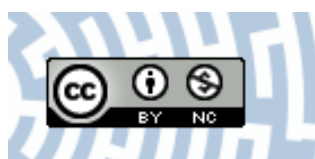


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Title: The process of diagnosing the underachievement syndrome in gifted and creative children

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The Process of Diagnosing the Underachievement Syndrome in Gifted and Creative Children

Abstract

The core of interest in the article concerns the process of identifying the underachievement syndrome in the group of gifted and creative pupils. Recognising the syndrome among gifted students relies on formal and informal diagnoses. Formal diagnosis demands the cooperation of educationalists and psychologists and depends on the comparison of school marks and scholastic achievement tests with the results of standardised tests for intelligence, creativity and special abilities. Informal diagnosis demands that the teacher be well informed about the syndrome and involves recognising specific details of the students' behaviour and functioning in the school and family environments. Such a diagnosis can be divided into five component elements: a diagnosis of constant tendencies and patterns in the student's behaviour at home and at school, a diagnosis of how the student behaves in typical school situations, a diagnosis of certain aspects of their personality, a diagnosis of typical factors in the family environment, a diagnosis of the school environment.

Key words: *underachievement syndrome; gifted, creative students; process of diagnosing.*

The problem of the underachievement syndrome, which affects many gifted children, is a peculiar phenomenon. Often for unexplained reasons students who had previously achieved the highest and most promising results, raising hopes for their future academic careers, "lower their sights" and do not learn as well as they could. The process of recognising this damaging phenomenon, defining it and identifying students affected by it, as well as discovering what causes it, is not

a simple task and is still a cause of considerable controversy among researchers, educationalists and psychologists, as well as among those who are directly involved – teachers and parents.

The underachievement syndrome can most simply be defined as a damaging situation in which gifted students fail to make use of their potential and abilities. A deeper psycho-educational analysis of these students shows considerable discrepancies between their results in intelligence tests, special abilities or creativity and low scores in tests of scholastic achievement, general school tests and school marks.

Underachieving students can be divided into two groups. The first group is comprised of students with a chronic and recurrent discrepancy between their potential and scholastic achievement. The second group consists of students whose underachievement is sporadic, episodic and situational. The students in the second group experience a short-term drop in achievement. This situation is a reaction to temporary, unfavourable circumstances, which manifests itself as a reluctance to study, indifference or lack of ambition and is caused by temporary crises, emotional problems and family problems (such as illness, conflict in the family, personal problems, death in the family, long term stress, divorce of the parents, losing a friend or conflict with teachers), which can be easily diagnosed (French, 1973). In the vast majority of cases such situational drops in achievement evolve with time into chronic underachievement, making an expert and accurate diagnosis of the causes of this damaging phenomenon extremely important. The latest research results (Colangelo, 2003) concerning the etiology of the Scholastic Underachievement Syndrome provide the following conclusions: the syndrome is most often revealed as early as in the first form of primary school; the syndrome appears periodically or episodically, can last months or years and suddenly disappear, or can also appear in middle school after satisfactory achievement in primary school. Delisle (1992, quoted in: Colangelo, 2003) suggests dividing students who do not make the most of their abilities into *underachievers* and *non-producers*. These two types require different therapeutic approaches. Non-producers need a small amount of work and help from educationalists and psychologists for their underachievement to be quickly overcome. Students with full Scholastic Underachievement Syndrome need a long-term and holistic therapy which engages the cooperation of the school, the parents and psycho-educational counselling.

Diagnosing the Scholastic Underachievement Syndrome

The reasons why gifted students fail to use their exceptional abilities are of a diverse character and result from both internal and external factors. Recognising the syndrome among gifted students relies on formal and informal diagnoses. A formal diagnosis demands the cooperation of educationalists and psychologists and depends on the comparison of school marks and scholastic achievement tests with the results of standardised tests for intelligence, creativity and special abilities. An informal diagnosis demands that the teacher be well informed about the syndrome and involves recognising specific details of the students' behaviour and functioning in the school and family environments. Such a diagnosis can be divided into 5 component elements: a diagnosis of constant tendencies and patterns in the student's behaviour at home and at school, a diagnosis of how the student behaves in typical school situations, a diagnosis of certain aspects of their personality, a diagnosis of typical factors in the family environment, a diagnosis of the school environment. Students with SUS cannot be classified into one homogenous group. As with the example of the characteristics of gifted children, we can find a large diversity and variability in their behaviour, interests and abilities.

Diagnosis of constant tendencies and patterns in the students' behaviour at home and at school

The diagnosis of constant tendencies and patterns in the student's behaviour at home and at school involves identifying characteristic and established symptoms in the behaviour and conduct of the student. The psychological qualities of gifted students which lead to underachievement in their studies include emotional characteristics connected with emotional and social immaturity. We can also distinguish here between the group of students who are aggressive, the group who are withdrawn and the type which is a mix of the rebellious and the withdrawn. Students who are publicly and visibly aggressive demonstrate temperamental, violent and confrontational behaviour. Withdrawn students are bored, disinterested and unengaged. The third type (rebellious and withdrawn) are a combination of aggressive and passive behaviour, students displaying a mix of behaviours (Whitmore, 1980). S. Rimm (1994, 2003), describing the types of behaviour characteristic of students with the syndrome differentiates between submissiveness and domination. Submissive students ("withdrawn") are those who are apprehensive, who often cry and who are disorganised. They are characterised by a withdrawn posture,

passivity, excessive subservience and dependence on the influence of other people, shyness, a tendency towards isolation, seclusion, low self-esteem and a lack of faith in their own abilities. Dominant students (displaying different kinds of hyperactivity, including emotional, intellectual, psycho-kinaesthetic, sensory, imagination), often presenting aggressive and hostile behaviour, are undisciplined and distrustful. They are group leaders who force their will on others and with a tendency towards mood swings they are confrontational, contrary and manipulative. The author also identifies sub-groups of the submissive and dominant types, dividing them into submissive conformist and nonconformist and dominant conformist and nonconformist. Students with nonconformist behaviour demonstrate stronger and clearer characteristics of submissiveness or dominance. Nonconformist students possess a strong sense of self-worth, confidence in their own abilities, implying self-confidence and decisiveness.

Diagnosis of how the student behaves in typical school situations

The diagnosis of how the student behaves in typical school situations comes down to identifying the most common behaviour of students on the basis of the teacher's perceptive observations. If the teacher notices certain symptoms, at least some of the aforementioned student behaviours, this is the first signal that the child has learning difficulties despite its abilities. Such symptoms could be: weak results in class work, tests and answers, lack of effort in class work and homework, significant disproportion between a high level of cognitive abilities and a low level of execution of school work, emotional hyperactivity, excessive shyness, large potential abilities and a simultaneous lack of the ability to learn, a tendency to manipulate their surroundings, a wide range of knowledge, but a simultaneous lack of mastery of the material covered in class, wide interests outside school and a minimal effort applied to school work, a discrepancy between the level of oral and written answers (oral answers are significantly better than written work), concentration of their attention on a chosen subject, having one passion or hobby, which overrides their schoolwork, low self-esteem, large untapped creative potential, impulsiveness and difficulty in making their own judgements, an inability to set realistic goals and unrealistic expectations of themselves, a tendency to withdraw or aggressive domination in a group, problems in creating contacts with peers, an inability to work in a group, discipline problems and opposition to the teacher's orders, a passive or negative attitude towards school duties, avoiding involvement in unfamiliar and new situations because of a fear of failure, difficulties finishing tasks or work they have started, problems with concentration, daydreaming, disorganised work (Whitmore, 1980; Butler-Por, 1993; Rimm, 1994, 2000, 2003).

Diagnosis of certain aspects of their personality

Psychologists point out that one factor in why gifted students do not achieve satisfactory school results is that they have personal problems with interpersonal relationships in their families, at school and among their peers. Children who do not achieve success are often unaware of their learning problems. This is related to the fact that they have not discovered their own study methods and are not good at managing their own work. For such students it is easier to blame their lack of success on boring programmes of study or incompetent teachers. Underachieving students have a negative attitude to themselves, characterised by an unfavourable self-image, negative self-esteem and a low level of the sense of self-worth. These traits reveal themselves as a lack of faith in themselves and others, hostility towards their surroundings, weak motivation to study and a lack of perseverance in their endeavours. These traits also lead to a significantly high level of apprehensiveness in these students. These children learn slowly and cannot make use of their knowledge and experience. Among gifted children one can also find individuals who see no sense in mastering new information or skills and are not interested in them. Weak results at school are also a result of numerous, diverse interests, values and goals which do not have an intellectual character and are not connected with school (Borzym, 1979, Tyszkowa, 1990). Gifted students who do badly at school reveal lacks in their personalities. They have a lower level of capability of systematic and organised study, characterised by a fear of success or passive-aggressive behaviour (Borzym, 1979, Tyszkowa, 1990, Rimm, 1994). Gifted students with weak or bad performance on school work often do not believe in their ability to achieve success at school, are full of complexes, do not trust themselves and in this way they approach new tasks with a pre-fabricated negative attitude. Gifted students who do not make use of their above average abilities are, as a rule, less emotionally mature, including the group of students who are hyperactive, psychokinaesthetically inhibited or strongly neurotic and also those with slight brain damage (Borzym, 1979). Numerous studies also show that the majority of gifted students who do badly at school have a tendency to hasty generalisations and chaotic thinking which lacks reasoning. Many studies on the causes of the syndrome stress the role of the locus of control, which in underachieving students has typically external roots. Students with the Scholastic Underachievement Syndrome blame others (parents, teachers, peers, school) for their lack of success, claiming that they have the proverbial bad luck and thinking that they cannot be in control of their school activities. Their behaviour is dominated by a fear of failure, so they often choose tasks which are too easy and do not contribute to their development. The next significant element connected with the personality traits of students with

SUS is lowered self-esteem and motivation to study. The results of the research (Reis, McCoach, 2004, 181–212) into the personality factors which lead to the underachievement syndrome stress the role of the low sense of self-worth or low evaluation of the effectiveness of actions. Students with SUS are also characterised by pessimism, a withdrawn attitude, distrust and reluctance to take on challenges. The majority of students who perform below their abilities at school set themselves goals which are not directly connected with studying and do not have an intellectual character. Their motivation to study is often low and not commensurate with their abilities. However, the main causes of low self-esteem are opposition and subconscious hostility to pressure from adults, external motivation based on goals and standards set by adults, instead of internal motivation based on internal standards of behaviour and a sense of self-worth. The research into the self-image of underachieving students reveals that they perceive themselves very negatively in relation to their surroundings. They think that they are not accepted by their peers or adults, have problems communicating with those around them, cannot show their emotions and cannot face up to problematic situation connected with social functioning. Their lack of belief in their own abilities and lack of self-confidence are characterised by apprehensiveness, emotional instability, inability to deal with conflict, an excessive need to belong and excessive adaptation to their surroundings, fear of negative peer opinions typical of puberty, alienation, opposition and rebellion against authority, lack of ability to learn, weak self-control, lack of perseverance in activities, lack of determination and persistence in achieving goals and unwillingness to take on tasks which involve responsibility. (Whitmore, 1980; Rimm, 2003). Among the personality factors which characterise gifted students who do not achieve satisfactory results at school we can also notice behaviour which suggests a tendency to impulsiveness, hyperactivity, aggression and hostility towards their surroundings.

Diagnosis of typical factors in the family environment.

Many studies on the family circumstances of students with SUS reveal that their home environment is closely connected with their level of achievement at school. One of the most important factors influencing the appearance of the syndrome is the parents' preferred style of bringing up their children. The diagnosis of factors typical of the family environment leads to the conclusion that often the real reasons for underachievement are directly connected with the cultural conditions of the family, the level of care for the child and its school work, the educational atmosphere in the home and the parents' attitude. The majority of behaviours characteristic of underachieving students is based on family relationships, especially in early

childhood. Many gifted children do not make use of their rich talents in family life, which places no value on qualities linked with education. It is very common to hear the parents criticise the school and teachers in front of the child. Parents' belittling of the value of qualities connected with studying, gaining knowledge or hard work is an important factor in the appearance of the underachievement syndrome in their children. Students who follow their parents' example do not set themselves goals connected with education based on their abilities.

Among the most common mistakes made in children upbringing we must point out: a lack of consistency in their upbringing, spoiling the child or being too strict. Many parents put too much pressure on intellectual development, set unrealistic goals and have too high expectations of their children's achievements. Lack of acceptance, insufficient or excessive attention from parents, a lack of interest or support from the side of the parents and parental indifference to or neglect of the child can lead to the formation of submissive or dominant behaviour in the child. Negative role models in the family or a lack of positive role models mean that by following their parents' example, children learn to achieve results which are below their abilities. Another unfortunate situation involves all sorts of different difficulties, problems and pathologies in the family (unemployment, divorce, alcoholism, a disorganised home) and are connected with a lack of support in the family, a lack of a sense of safety and family warmth, which leads to a lack of motivation and ability to study. Among domestic factors which raise the danger of SUS occurrence, we must mention the situation of long awaited children, children raised by single mothers, sickly children and prodigal children (Rimm, 1994). Very often these situations lead to overprotective behaviour or excessive leniency, which in turn leads to overinflated expectations of the child. Consequently, this leads to the formation of dominant or submissive behaviour in the child, which has a negative influence on the development of independence and ability to deal with difficult situations. Submissiveness in children comes from their dependence on their parents and appears at school age as a sense of a lack of security, immaturity, hyperactivity or inability to study. Dominant behaviour, which has the same roots, may not appear during the first school years as long as the child is satisfied with its ability to achieve success. Problems appear in later forms when students have to face tasks of increasing difficulty.

The final domestic cause of the syndrome is the situation of "unwanted children" or "unaccepted children", where the parents show aversion to the child. This failure to meet the child's needs means the child cannot form a true self-image and has lowered self-esteem, which often manifests itself as aggressive behaviour with the goal of attracting attention. (Rimm, 1994, 2000).

Diagnosis of the school environment

The diagnosis of the school environment allows us to isolate the most common factors connected with school which lead to the appearance of the syndrome. Unsatisfactory results at school can be a consequence of inappropriate teacher attitudes, peers, defective educational programmes or teaching methods. In school life we often come across teachers who are not prepared for work with gifted children. Among the mistakes teachers make, the most common one is a lack of proper psycho-educational diagnosis and consequent lowering of expectations because of a faulty diagnosis of gifted children. In schools the following negative behaviour by teachers is not uncommon: unfair marks, inappropriate comments about grades, comparing students' results, concentrating on mistakes and failures, unconstructive criticism of bad results of individual students in front of the whole class and expressions of surprise when students the teacher thinks are weak get good marks. Many teachers still prefer traditional and deductive methods of teaching which lead to boredom and a loss of interest in the subject. Teaching programmes which are not stimulating or suitable for gifted children are another significant factor, creating a conflict between their hobbies and interests and the study programmes they are obliged to follow at school. Schools often prefer conventional behaviour, connected with imitative and convergent thinking. Gifted students tend to be people with large creative potential, nonconformists with divergent thinking, whose ideas and ways of behaving do not meet with approval from traditional teachers.

The research of F. Painter (1993) shows that a large portion of outstanding students deliberately do not show their abilities in front of their parents and teachers because they do not want them to know how easily they cope with school work.

The significant role of the personality, psychological and environmental factors described in the occurrence of the underachievement syndrome in gifted children is not the same at all stages of development. Often these factors co-occur and lead to strong and lasting underachievement at school. In early childhood the factors related to personality or family dominate, but at later stages the factors related to the environment play a significantly greater role, particularly those connected with school, and they can even be enough to cause the syndrome on their own.

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