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The greatest achievement of the human spirit is to live up to one’s opportunities and make the most of one’s resources.

—Luc de Clapiers

Underachievement is among the most frustrating and bewildering education issues parents and educators face. It is not a crisis of a certain group of people; it is a very real factor in the lives of students from both low and high socioeconomic groups and from rural as well as urban areas. Although it is more common among males, it can also be an issue for females. Underachievement often surfaces around middle school and can continue into high school and beyond (Peterson & Colangelo, 1996). A majority of male underachievers are already underachieving during seventh grade, compared to a majority of female underachievers, who begin to underachieve during eighth and ninth grade (Peterson & Colangelo, 1996). Some researchers have suggested that as high as 50% of gifted students underachieve at some point. However, the extent of underachievement among gifted students is difficult to measure for two reasons. First, there is no universally accepted
definition of giftedness. Second, some controversy surrounds what criteria should be used to define underachievement.

On the surface, educators and parents may view academic underachievement as a motivation issue. However, underperforming is much more complex than simply not being motivated. Additionally, several factors contribute to individuals being motivated. Students fail to engage and fail to achieve for a variety of reasons. The purpose of this book is to review the reasons why students are not achieving to their full potential and to discuss strategies that they and others in their environment can consider to help reverse their underachievement.

In the early 1990s, Csikszentmihalyi (1993) coined the term flow to describe peak experiences people have. During these experiences, individuals are completely absorbed in what they are doing and often lose track of time. Generally speaking, flow occurs when activities offer a high degree of challenge in areas where individuals perceive themselves as possessing a high degree of skill. Maximum performance occurs during these flow experiences. Flow occurs when individuals have clear goals, decisiveness, the merging of action and awareness, complete (yet effortless) concentration, a sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, an altered sense of time, immediate feedback, and a focus totally on the activity without regard to self (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). One goal of parents and educators can be to help young people become more engaged so they can have flow experiences. My own work (Siegle & McCoach, 2005b) has shown that students who believe they have the necessary skills to perform a task, who find the task meaningful, and who feel supported in their efforts tend to embrace learning and achieve. Unfortunately, these conditions are often not present for many gifted and talented students in school.

Gentry (Gentry, Rizza, & Gable, 2001) has suggested that five interrelated concepts should underlie educational programs for gifted and talented students: challenge, choice, interest, enjoyment, and personal meaning. Many gifted students are not being academically challenged because they have long ago mastered the content they are being asked to complete (Reis et al., 1993). This is particularly true during the early elementary years. It can be problematic for students because they fail to develop the self-discipline, work habits, and effective study
skills that they need once the curriculum does become challenging. A second danger is that they do not come to expect school to be an exciting place for them to grow or to learn new things.

Gifted and talented programs have traditionally focused on identifying students’ interests and strengths and providing them with opportunities to explore their passions (Renzulli, 2012). Unfortunately, when economic times are difficult, gifted and talented programs are often the first to be cut (Purcell, 1994). Gifted and talented students also spend the majority of their school experience in the regular classroom where differentiation and choice options are limited (Archambault et al., 1993). Although teachers may want to provide appropriate educational opportunities for the gifted and talented students in their classroom, few teachers have received the necessary training to understand the needs of gifted and talented students and how best to serve them (Archambault et al., 1993).

Educators are not the only group responsible for making school more meaningful for students; parents also play a role. The importance parents place on schoolwork and the type of work ethic they model for their children also directly influence the meaningfulness and enjoyment young people associate with school. Parents who are unhappy with the educational opportunities their gifted and talented offspring is receiving can inadvertently sabotage the child’s educational achievement. This is particularly true when parents share their concerns with the student. Parents have a duty to advocate for appropriate educational experiences for their children, but they should also not impugn the importance of school and education.

Although underachievement is not a prominent area of research in general education, it is a major area of concern in gifted education. When The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented conducted a national needs assessment on issues related to gifted education, the underachievement of gifted students was the highest area of concern (Renzulli, Reid, & Gubbins, 1991). Colangelo (2003) reported that underachievement was the problem most often addressed by counselors in his center for gifted students. In fact, entire careers have been built around counseling and reversing the underachievement patterns of gifted students (Rimm, 1996).
Because humans are diverse and complex beings, decades of research and counseling experiences in the field of gifted education have not produced a single “silver bullet” to solve this perplexing issue. However, promising practices exist, and many individuals have been successful in helping students turn their underachievement around (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995; Rimm, 1995; Whitmore, 1980). Underachieving students have traditionally benefitted from counseling interventions, modifications in their curriculum, or a combination of both. What works for one student may not work for another. An individual student may find a topic interesting while another student finds it mundane. What motivates one individual to pursue a challenging course of action holds little relevance to another individual. Although achievers share some central beliefs about themselves and their attitudes to school, underachievers differ much more from each other on these issues (McCoach & Siegle, 2003a). Therefore, no single plan for reversing underachievement works with every student who is not achieving to his or her potential. However, because achievers do share some common characteristics, this information is useful to consider when helping low-achieving students reverse their underachievement pattern.

What we do know is that if nothing is done, many underachievers will not catch up after they leave high school. The greater their underachievement, the less likely they will reverse it. Students with high IQ scores and mediocre grades tend to produce in life what students with average IQ scores and mediocre grades produce. In other words, their life accomplishments are more closely related to their grades than to their academic potential. Their unexplored talents represent potential loss for society and for their own self-fulfillment. However, students with highly educated parents and students with high aspirations have a greater chance of catching up and reversing this pattern (McCall, 1994). Therefore, extra attention needs to be given to students of poverty and students from traditionally underrepresented groups.

So, why do some gifted students fail to perform at a level commensurate with their abilities? What happens to underachieving gifted students in occupational settings if they do not achieve academically during their adolescent years? How can parents and educa-
tors help gifted students reach their potential? Can anything be done to reverse underachievement? This book reviews research related to these questions and describes several practices that have helped students recognize their potential and strive to achieve it.
What Is Underachievement?

Who are gifted underachievers? Informally, students whose grades have dropped, who do not complete their homework, or who put off completing projects could certainly be candidates. More formally, controversy surrounds the processes of defining both giftedness and underachievement. Therefore, identifying gifted underachieving students can be difficult for two reasons. First, no universally accepted definition of giftedness exists. Theories of what constitutes giftedness (Sternberg & Davidson, 2005) and what criteria to use in identifying gifted students (Hunsaker, 2012; Johnsen, 2011) abound. However, the field of gifted education has never reached consensus on either a theory or an identification system. Second, disagreement surrounds how to define underachievement. When attempting to identify gifted underachievers, some apply the colloquial expression, “I know it when I see it,” a phrase made famous by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when describing the threshold test for por-
nography. Similarly, parents with a child who is not performing as expected recognize underachievement without a formal diagnosis. A related issue concerns the value judgment surrounding the term *underachievement*. Whose standards, expectations, or values should be used to determine whether a student is underachieving?

**Who Is Gifted?**

It is beyond the scope of this book to fully answer the questions, “What is giftedness?” or “Who is gifted?” Readers who are interested in the topic from a theoretical perspective will enjoy reading Sternberg and Davidson's (2005) excellent edited volume, *Conceptions of Giftedness*, or Dai’s (2010) text, *The Nature and Nurture of Giftedness*. The National Association for Gifted Children (2010) recently released a position paper on the topic. It provides some guidance for practitioners as they struggle with the concept. I have included the full text of the NAGC position paper in the Appendix. The NAGC definition suggests:

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).

The development of ability or talent is a lifelong process. It can be evident in young children as exceptional performance on tests and/or other measures of ability or as a rapid rate of learning, compared to other students of the same age, or in actual achievement in a domain. As individuals mature through childhood to adolescence, however, achievement and high levels of motivation in the domain become the primary characteristics of their giftedness. Various factors can either
enhance or inhibit the development and expression of abilities. (para. 1–2)

For the most part, gifted and talented students in the elementary years are probably those who do things a little earlier and a little better than other students of the same age. They are also those who could be doing things earlier or better if they had been given appropriate opportunities. Many students in this country have not been given appropriate educational opportunities for their giftedness to surface and flourish. This is particularly true for students from underserved populations. These include students of color, students from poverty, and in some cases, students from rural and urban populations.

As students grow older, their advanced abilities become more specialized, and potential is expected to manifest itself. Therefore, gifted underachievers are those who fail to further develop the advanced skills they initially demonstrated or those whose untapped potential failed to materialize. In both cases, it is a discrepancy between what is and what might be. As stated in Chapter 1, it is talent lost—both to the student and to society.

**Discrepancy**

McCall (1994) suggested that “underachievers do not necessarily have bad grades—just grades not as good as one might expect” (p. 16). This may be particularly true for gifted underachievers. Most definitions of underachievement include a discrepancy between potential (expected performance), often measured by a test, and achievement (actual performance), often measured by achievement tests or school grades (Baum et al., 1995; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Emerick, 1992; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 1997; Supplee, 1990; Whitmore, 1980). Practitioners, researchers, and scholars generally agree conceptually that underachievement is a discrepancy between expected and actual performance, but they differ in how they operationalize the discrepancy between potential and performance.
For instance, Emerick (1988) suggested this discrepancy might include any of the following combinations:

- high IQ score and low achievement test scores;
- high IQ score and low grades;
- high achievement test scores and low grades;
- high indicators of intellectual, creative potential and low creative productivity; or
- high indicators of potential and limited presence of appropriate opportunity for intellectual and creative development.

Emerick’s last category is an interesting one. With this definition, others have failed the child by not providing opportunities for his or her talents to manifest themselves. This concern has grown over the past decade as policymakers grapple with the expanding achievement gaps among different groups in the United States (Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010).

The specific students identified by the various discrepancy definitions Emerick (1988) proposed are likely to be quite different from one another. Therefore, lists describing characteristics of underachievers are often contradictory (see Chapter 3). Additionally, a high IQ score and low achievement test scores may indicate the presence of a learning disability, whereas high achievement test scores and low grades seldom indicate a learning disability. Educators and parents must be careful not to immediately assume a bright child who is having difficulty in school is underachieving; the student may have a learning disability. Moon and Hall (1998) have suggested that gifted students who are underachieving should be screened for a learning disability. The first step in Sylvia Rimm’s Trifocal Model (see Chapter 6) is a comprehensive assessment of the student’s strengths and abilities; this assessment should reveal any learning disabilities a student might have.

There are several issues that one must consider when defining underachievement using a discrepancy between expected achievement and actual achievement. First, how should one determine expected achievement? Second, how should one determine a student’s actual
What Is Underachievement? Third, how severe must the discrepancy be between expected achievement and actual achievement?

**Measuring Expected Achievement**

Ability measures such as IQ tests are traditionally used to determine levels of expected achievement. In fact, underachievement first became an educational issue in the mid-1950s as a result of the broad acceptance of ability and achievement tests (McCall, 1994). Once the public gained confidence in the use of these tests, concerns began to surface about students who were not performing at the level the tests predicted they should. Ability and achievement are substantially correlated; however, the degree of this relation is far from perfect. The correlation between ability and achievement is approximately .80 (Deary, Strand, Smith, & Fernandes, 2007). Although this correlation is quite strong, it leaves 36% of the fluctuation in achievement unaccounted for by ability. For example, conscientiousness, one of the Big Five personality traits—emotional stability, extroversion, agreeableness, and openness being the others—correlates with college GPA and has also been shown to be largely independent of intelligence. Agreeableness and openness are also related to achievement, but their relationship disappears once statistical models account for intelligence (Poropat, 2009). Therefore, many factors, including personality, play a role in student achievement. Still, achievement tests are widely used in schools across the country and are readily available, which makes them an excellent source of information.

Students with learning disabilities often score higher on tests of cognitive ability than they do on standardized achievement tests. This is particularly true for students with reading disabilities, because IQ tests require less reading than standardized achievement tests. As stated earlier, students with high ability and low standardized achievement test scores may be underachievers, or they may have undiagnosed learning disabilities and should be screened for learning disabilities prior to treating them for underachievement. For the above reasons, Siegle and McCoach (in press) recommended that standardized achievement tests provide a better indicator of expected
achievement than intelligence tests do. Care must be taken to ensure the achievement test does not have a ceiling that limits its ability to measure the extent of the student’s advanced skills. An out-of-level test should be used if this occurs.

**Measuring Actual Achievement**

Given the definition of underachievement as a discrepancy between expected achievement and actual achievement, standardized achievement test scores are not appropriate measures of actual student achievement for two reasons. First, if standardized achievement test scores are used to determine a student’s expected achievement, they cannot also be used to measure the student’s actual achievement. Second, standardized test scores are not a good indicator of a student’s classroom performance, and classroom performance is a good indicator of later success in life (McCall, Evahn, & Kratzler, 1992). McCall et al. (1992) conducted the largest longitudinal study of underachievers to date and documented the role classroom grades play in future productivity. Thirteen years after high school, the educational and occupational status of high school underachievers paralleled their grades in high school rather than their abilities. In other words, students with high IQ scores and mediocre grades performed similarly to students with average IQ scores and mediocre grades. As mentioned in Chapter 1, McCall (1994) has suggested that students are more likely to catch up in life if their parents are well educated and the students have high aspirations.

Classroom grades provide the most valid indication of a student’s level of achievement within a classroom. However, using classroom grades to assess academic achievement also poses problems. We cannot equate grades across teachers, classes, and schools. Even within the same school, instructors teaching the same course may have very different methods for assigning grades. Many teachers consider factors other than academic achievement (i.e., effort and behavior) when assigning grades (Marzano, 2000). Therefore, comparing grades or GPAs across students can be misleading. Given these drawbacks, my colleagues and I (Siegle & McCoach, in press) still believe grades are
the best reflection of how a student is performing in a given class and of student motivation. In fact, underachievement tends to show up when students begin encountering teachers who assign challenging assignments and require homework (McCall, 1994).

Therefore, a possible yardstick to measure underachievement is the discrepancy between students’ achievement scores and their grades. These students are apparently learning the material but are not producing in their classrooms. Most of this book centers on these students and addresses the motivation issues surrounding this phenomenon. Unfortunately, chronic underachievers who have underachieved for an extended period of time may begin to demonstrate mediocre or low achievement test scores and mediocre or poor grades as a result of disengaged classroom performance over multiple years. An improvement in motivation for these students must be accompanied by academic remediation to correct deficit skills that they possess after years of underachievement.

Severity of the Discrepancy Between Expected and Actual Achievement

Reis and McCoach (2000) published a comprehensive review of the literature on gifted underachievers and proposed the following definition:

Underachievers are students who exhibit a severe discrepancy between expected achievement (as measured by standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments) and actual achievement (as measured by class grades and teacher evaluations). To be classified as an underachiever, the discrepancy between expected and actual achievement must not be the direct result of a diagnosed learning disability and must persist over an extended period of time. Gifted underachievers are underachievers who exhibit superior scores on measures of expected achievement (i.e., standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments). (p. 157)
How severe should the discrepancy be between expected achievement and actual achievement before a student is considered underachieving? First, given the phenomenon of regression to the mean, we would not expect the actual achievement levels of those with the highest standardized achievement to be equally extreme. Regression to the mean is a phenomenon where extremely high or extremely low scores tend to move toward the average on later or related testing simply by chance. For example, a student who earns a perfect score on a test is likely not to have a second perfect score because he or she might misread a question or have some other chance error occur. Similarly, a student who misses every question might by chance answer one or two correctly on a second or different test. In addition to the possibility of regression to the mean, most people probably perform somewhat below their capacity or ability, so some discrepancy is expected. Thus, the discrepancy between students’ expected achievement and their actual achievement must be severe enough to warrant substantial concern. The discrepancy also must be chronic. Patterns of underachievement must persist long enough to be detectable and to cause adverse consequences. In other words, we would not consider a child an underachiever who traditionally earned A’s in mathematics, but suddenly earned a C. If those C’s continued for several marking periods, then parents and educators should become concerned. Care must be taken to ensure that episodic underachievement does not morph into ongoing underachievement.

For those who like numbers and statistics, McCall (1994) suggested that students who fall more than one standard error below the regression of grades on an ability measure represent an acceptable statistical discrepancy. He argued that this definition holds well across different samples and with different measures of potential and performance. It also works well across different levels of ability and grades. As a hypothetical example, assume students with IQ scores of 130 have a predicted grade point average (GPA) of 3.6, and students with IQ scores of 100 have a predicted GPA of 2.9. If the standard error were .43, students with an IQ of 130 who earn a 2.5 GPA would fall more than one standard error (.43) below the predicted GPA of 3.6,
and students with an IQ of 100 who earned a 2.5 would just avoid falling one standard error (.43) below their predicted GPA (2.9).

Selective Achievement

Before I conclude this chapter, I need to address the issue of selective achievement. Some have argued (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Hébert, 2011; Porter, 2005) that students who choose to put their energies into areas other than school should not be labeled underachievers, and the label of underachievement is often a value judgment.

Labeling a student an underachiever requires making a value judgment about the worthiness of certain accomplishments. A teacher may believe that reading *Huckleberry Finn* is more worthwhile than mastering a new video game, but a child may not. This behavior illustrates a value conflict between adults and child. (Reis & McCoach, 2000, p. 156)

On a personal note, I was one of the taller boys in my high school, and some thought I should be playing basketball. I had poor eyesight and lacked depth perception. I had no interest in playing basketball; the last activity I wanted to pursue was one that involved fast-moving flying objects. I elected not to participate in basketball, much to the anguish of an older cousin. Some might classify me as an underachieving basketball player. Had I been a foot taller, more might have classified me as such. This brings us to an interesting point—underachieving in whose eyes? It is unreasonable to expect gifted students to achieve at the highest levels in every area. Gifted students may choose not to exert effort in areas that are not important to them while expending effort to excel in areas that they enjoy and value. This is generally referred to as selective achievement. Additionally, each student possesses a unique spectrum of traits and talents. Therefore, even highly gifted students may perform at near-average levels in an area of relative weakness.
In addition to selective achievement, some have proposed the term *nonproducer*. From this perspective, students are simply electing not to do the work others may be asking them to do. As with selective achievement, the choice to be engaged is with the student. These situations are similar to life outside school. Ultimately, the final decision about what each of us pursues is up to us. However, there is an additional twist with gifted underachievers. For some nonproducing individuals, having the label of gifted is sufficiently satisfying: “It doesn’t matter whether I have accomplished anything, I’m still gifted.” As I travel across the country, I often find myself seated on airplanes next to a 40–50-year-old gifted nonproducer. These nonproducers lament the fact that they haven’t developed their talents and reached their potential. However, they seem to bask in the afterglow of the gifted label or high-IQ score they received as a child. Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011) cautioned that although general abilities are often associated with giftedness at a young age, as students grow older, their domain-specific abilities become more important. One could make the case, although not universally accepted, that these individuals are no longer gifted underachievers. They simply are average or below-average achievers. The area of adult underachievement is one that has received little attention and is beyond the scope of this book. I will focus our attention on young people who could be doing better.

Thus, the students who should be of greatest concern are those who are failing to achieve in *any* productive area over a period of time. As Peterson (2001) cautioned, “Wise educators will not make judgments about future prospects for underachievers based on only one stage of development or during a time of significant personal or family transition” (p. 246). For example, even successful gifted students may experience uneven academic performance from time to time in high school. The difference between them and underachievers is that they have established habits of achievement that are able to withstand academic unevenness (Peterson & Colangelo, 1996).

As Warnemuende and Samson (1991) noted, “Although we call the child an underachiever, remember, underachievement is not a diagnosis. It is not the primary problem. It is a symptom or sign that
there is a problem which results in underachievement” (pp. 9–10). In the next chapter, I will discuss the characteristics and behaviors of someone with this problem. Beginning with Chapter 4, I will share possible reasons for underachievement and provide promising strategies to address it.