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Reversing Underachievement: Stories of Success

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Bright underachieving students are often overlooked, especially in schools that serve at-risk populations. After studying 17 underachievers with high-academic potential, we've gained some insight into how the cycle can be reversed (Baum et al. 1994).

We use a prism metaphor to explain the process. Just as a prism takes in nondescript light and transforms it into colors, so does a student-centered enrichment process unleash the hidden potential of the underachieving student. The following vignettes will introduce you to three students who illustrate the complexity and diversity of the problem.[1]

Jamison

Jamison came from a dysfunctional family stricken with alcoholism and possibly child abuse. His time after school was totally unsupervised, and even his mother claimed "that school is his escape from our rocky home life." One afternoon, this 10-year-old was caught collecting money door to door for a local baseball team and then spending it on himself.

When screened for participation in an enrichment program, Jamison scored in the superior range on an individual intelligence test. Although Jamison's potential was apparent—his teachers noted his leadership skills, curiosity, keen observation, and divergent thinking skills—his grades had steadily declined.

For years, Jamison had been told that he was a distant relation of Abraham Lincoln, but his family had never provided him with the information to trace his ancestral history. His enrichment teacher, to whom he became very attached, assisted Jamison in his research in family genealogy. At her suggestion, Jamison wrote to the state archivist and, subsequently, received conclusive information that confirmed his belief. After completing his family tree, he presented a narrated slide show entitled "Jamison and Abe: 9th Cousins" to numerous audiences. Three local newspapers gave his presentations media coverage.

"This child has many strikes against him," Jamison's enrichment teacher commented, "but right now his project is meaningful to him. Most important, he and I have formed a bond that, I hope, will give him support and encouragement."

[1] Jamison, Mara, and Mark are pseudonyms.

Mara

Mara wore white makeup and black clothing. She associated with youngsters who were suspected of using drugs. Mara and her 8th grade friends prided themselves on their negative attitude about school.

Because Mara could solve math problems without having to do computations, she assumed that she was a witch. Mara had difficulty understanding her intelligence, and her academic record had declined since 5th grade.

After Mara's failed attempt to arrange a limousine joyride for herself and a group of friends, her classroom teachers, counselor, and enrichment teacher suggested that she spend more time in the enrichment resource room. Through her involvement in an environmental project with other young women concerned about such issues, Mara began to think of herself as a leader rather than a follower.

After she completed a highly regarded photographic essay on the emotions of junior high school students, Mara's principal asked her to serve as an orientation guide for incoming students. Mara's grades improved, her peer group changed, and her white makeup and black clothing disappeared.

Mark

Lost in a shuffle was the best way to describe Mark, a bright, underachieving 8th grader. He stammered when he spoke and had facial scars from an attack by guard dogs when he was 7. Although he was musically talented, Mark felt inferior.

Mark's parents were both teachers and placed a high value on academic excellence. When Mark began to receive *Cs* and *Ds* in 7th grade—despite superior scores on standardized achievement tests—his parents suspected an undiagnosed learning problem. Although he never overtly acted out, Mark resisted putting forth any effort to improve his grades.

At a school conference requested by Mark's parents, the enrichment specialist revealed Mark's interest in science and technology and volunteered to help him pursue his current passion: solar-powered vehicles. After visits with a community expert involved in designing solar-powered cars for a contest, Mark became enthused about entering the contest. Mark and his enrichment teacher met daily to design and construct his model car.

When the project was completed, Mark had gained self-confidence, his grades had improved, and he demonstrated a renewed sense of purpose. By his sophomore year, not only was Mark earning *A*s and *Bs*, but his stuttering had also diminished.

Understanding Underachievement

What did we learn from Jamison, Mara, Mark, and other young underachievers we worked with? In our national study, 12 teachers, trained to assist underachieving students with high

academic potential, selected 17 students—ages 8–15 (Baum et al. 1994). The teachers identified the students' strengths and interests and assisted them in developing creative projects. The findings shed some light on why students fall behind in their studies and how to reverse the cycle of underachievement (Baum et al. 1994).

First, *emotional issues* contribute to underachievement. For example, Jamison acted out to gain attention, exhibited behavior problems in school, and failed miserably in his academic work. Once he received positive attention from a caring adult, however, his achievement improved. Mark's problems stemmed from his lack of confidence and his physical disfigurement. After realizing his talent as a designer of solar cars, his stuttering disappeared and his schoolwork improved.

A second reason for underachievement is *peer group pressure*. Mara's need to be accepted by an undesirable peer group led to her negativity and academic failure. As her photography project evolved, this creative young woman gained considerable attention from a new peer group, who valued academic achievement. As a result, her need to underachieve as a way to gain popularity was no longer necessary.

The lack of an appropriate curriculum is a third reason for underachievement. All students in our study began to experience success when encouraged to pursue an area of interest in their preferred learning style. For instance, an 8th grader who refused to apply himself in social studies class was motivated to work diligently on a more complex assignment of his own choosing. Clearly, many students exhibit behavior problems in the classroom simply because of an unchallenging curriculum.

Finally, students may underachieve because of *undiagnosed learning disabilities and poor self-regulation strategies*. Many underachievers with high academic potential will not admit that they are having trouble learning. They prefer to attribute their poor performance to a boring curriculum or an unresponsive teacher (Baum et al. 1991). Once they pursue a self-determined goal, however, they are more willing to admit that poor learning strategies hinder their progress.

Reversing the Underachievement Pattern

The most compelling finding of our study was that involvement in creative productivity reversed the cycle of underachievement. Of the 17 students, 14 improved academically during that year and in the year following the intervention.

The few studies that have examined curricular approaches (as distinct from counseling and therapy) that are effective with high-ability underachievers have several important points in common. Unlike remedial approaches or traditional admonishments ("Learn how to get organized, and you will achieve" or "Work hard, and you will be rewarded"), the successful approaches tend to center on students, accentuate students' strengths, and value their interests. Several of these studies report that completing a meaningful project increases self-esteem, academic self-efficacy, and overall motivation (Baum et al. 1989, Baum and Owen 1988, Emerick 1992, Whitmore 1980).

Likewise, research on high-ability students, in general, indicates that allowing students to pursue topics of personal interest and in their preferred styles of learning often results in high levels of achievement. The *Total Talent Portfolio*, a planning matrix, provides guidance for examining the full dimensions of students' strengths by calling attention to interests, instructional style preferences, and preferred modes of expression, as well as the strongest areas of academic performance (Renzulli 1994). We have learned much about applying this type of learning experience with youngsters of all abilities and providing them with the guidance necessary to carry out advanced-level projects. The Portfolio is a major component of the *Enrichment Triad Model* (Renzulli 1977). This model provides students with: (1) general exploratory experiences that might stimulate a new area of interest; (2) authentic research skills and learning-how-to-learn skills that are necessary for pursuing an interest in greater depth; and (3) guidance in the pursuit of individual and small-group investigations of real problems that are designed to have an impact on a real audience.

The goal of what we call Type III Enrichment is for students to investigate real problems through authentic means of inquiry and present their findings to real audiences. Students collect raw data, apply advanced-level problem-solving techniques, and use the research strategies or artistic procedures of firsthand investigators within various fields of study. Detailed procedures and resources for guiding the investigative process have been widely field-tested over the years and provide teachers with a systematic set of strategies (Reis 1981, Delisle 1981, Gubbins 1982, Burns 1987).

The role of the teacher is crucial to the success of this approach. Teachers who are most effective in reversing the underachievement patterns

- take time to get to know the student before initiating an investigation;
- use their time with students to facilitate the process rather than counsel them regarding their underachievement;
- see their role as a facilitator of the process—for example, by arranging frequent student/teacher conferences, providing resources, allocating school time for students to complete the project, and making suggestions when students seem to be at a standstill;
- understand that students need to act like practicing professionals and share their products with real-world audiences;
- recognize the dynamic nature of the underachievement problem by observing students, reflecting on their behaviors as they work on their projects, and identifying strategies to help students overcome problems;
- consistently demonstrate patience and believe in the student!

The Prism Metaphor

Past efforts to reverse underachievement may have been using the wrong lens to focus the problem: study hard, do your homework, get good grades, and please your teachers. The approach described here suggests a prism metaphor (see fig. 1). Whereas real images are formed when rays of light are reflected in a mirror, something quite different happens when a ray of light is passed through a prism. Not only does it change direction, which is the goal of

reversing underachievement, but it also takes on qualitative differences. The result is a spectrum of color that is critically different from the light energy that originally entered this special environment. This mysterious phenomenon is similar to one observed when students pursue their own investigative experiences.

Although no formula can be prescribed that is appropriate for all students, we believe that the complex blending of effects that occurs within the context of enrichment experiences—much like a prism—helps explain the transformation of underachievers into confident, successful students.

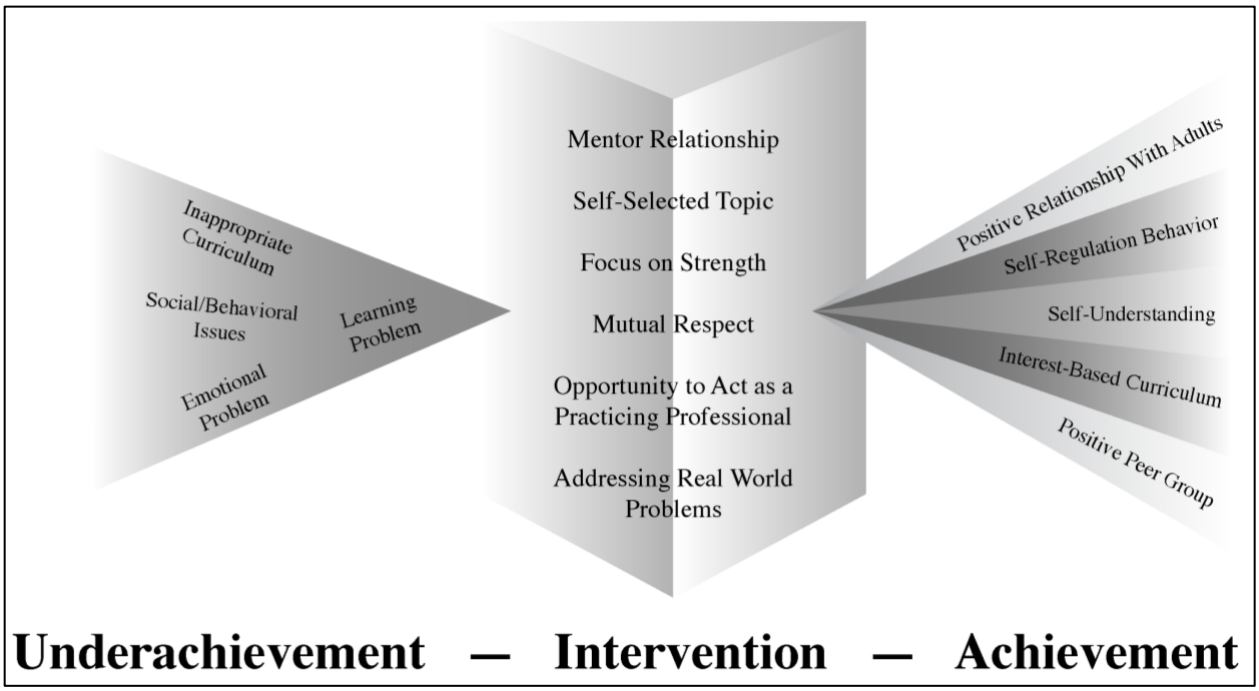

Figure 1. The Prism Metaphor for Reversing Underachievement

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