

香港資優教育學院  
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

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Article

**SPECIAL CHALLENGES:  
Underachievement and Perfectionism**

In 1998, the American researcher Sally Reis summarised current findings about underachievement as follows:

1. It appears that the beginnings of underachievement in many young people occur in primary school.
2. Underachievement appears to be periodic and episodic, occurring some years and not others and in some classes, not others.
3. A direct relationship seems to exist between inappropriate or too-easy content in primary school and underachievement in middle or secondary school.
4. Parental issues interact with the behaviours of some underachievers, yet no clear pattern exists about the types of parental behaviours that cause it.
5. Peers can play a major role in keeping underachievement from occurring in their close friends, making peer groups an important part of preventing and reversing it. Underachieving students tend to have peers with more negative school-attitudes.
6. Busier adolescents who are involved in clubs, extracurricular activities, sports and religious activities are less likely to underachieve in school.
7. Many similar behavioural characteristics are exhibited by bright students who achieve and underachieve in school.
8. There are some students who may underachieve as a direct result of an inappropriate and unmotivating curriculum.

To these trends, we would add two others that appear in a number of studies. Some gifted pupils begin to experience difficulties when they finally encounter challenging courses for the first time, often in secondary school. Having coasted through their earlier years of schooling, they may find themselves lacking the study skills, good work habits, and discipline to excel. According to a study by Mary Christiansen (1999), they may reassess their entire identity, refuse to take challenging courses, or become disenchanting and disengaged with school. Some help may be in order for them to adjust to not feeling like the brightest student anymore.

### **Underachievement**

Underachievement may also be linked to perfectionism in bright pupils, in the sense that assignments become tied to some students' sense of self-worth. These pupils endeavour to protect themselves from worries about not doing well by procrastinating or not handing in homework at all. Then mistakes or average marks may be excused in the student's mind as the product of the procrastination, not actual ability. Perfectionism means that pupils may not only be unforgiving about their own mistakes, but unaccepting of others' "inferior" work; they may react negatively to sharing responsibility for group work, for example. And while some gifted perfectionists fear failure (possibly because they have never experienced it and gotten past it), others actually fear success because it may bring expectations of continued high achievement, or possibly more responsibility than the pupil feels he or she can handle.

Teachers can assist when they witness underachievement by meeting with pupils to try to ascertain its causes. They can also take care not to single students out in a way that may cause discomfort.

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For instance, some teachers' remarks engender hostility and jealousy from peers when the teacher uses a student as a standard, jokes about his or her "slipping performance" (when it is still high), refers to the student as a "genius," or the like. The most effective praise is often given privately.

### Perfectionism

A considerable number of ideas relating to perfectionism has been synthesised elsewhere in this website for a teenage audience.

Many gifted pupils are perfectionists, and that is no accident, for perfectionism has positive aspects as well as negative ones. (It is not, as some have historically thought, a sign of mental illness.) Therapist Linda Kreger Silverman (1999: 216) suggests that it be viewed "as an energy that needs to be channelled in positive directions, not a malady to be cured." On the plus side, perfectionism leads people to excel, to develop their potentialities into something constructive and special. Avoiding failures is not necessarily a bad thing, and gifted pupils often aptly predict the consequences of their own actions in order to do so. Anne-Marie Roeper writes (in Silverman 1999:218), "As a rule, it will take the gifted longer to decide to dive into the pool, but they will be less likely to hit their heads on the bottom."

Perfectionism is also an expression that there is more to life than the mundane, that doing one's best gives meaning to life. Sometimes when school work is easy, perfectionism is a boredom-reduction strategy; the only challenge a pupil can find is to produce work perfectly, or complicate the task so that s/he feels some satisfaction from accomplishing it. It's also important to recognise that society's attitude to perfectionism is inconstant; when perfectionism is applied to a competitive field, and an individual is believed to have the talent to compete on an international level (think of sports), perfectionism is encouraged. In areas less "relevant" to society, it is often discouraged. So the culture's values have to be considered in evaluating attitudes to perfectionism generally.

Having said all of that, the literature also makes clear that perfectionism can endanger a young person's happiness and impede the development of his or her abilities. Many pupils fear failure. This is particularly true of introverts who rehearse their acts or speeches mentally, trying to stave off public humiliation. They try hard to show the world their best, not their works-in-progress. But the very fear of mistakes, the emotional weight attached to an accomplishment, may paralyse future efforts or the desire to take risks that may promote growth and learning. It may lead pupils to feel besieged with guilt and shame when no one seems to understand their sense of inferiority when they don't meet their own high standards. After all, they have succeeded in the past, and thus expect to succeed in the future regardless of the difficulty of the challenge. This attitude may become excruciating as pupils add to their repertoire of activities, trying to be perfect in too many areas simultaneously.

Teachers should not make the mistake of assuming that the pressure of such exacting standards is coming from parents. Most of the pressure, according to the research, actually comes from within the young person; many have easygoing parents with quite realistic expectations. Linda Silverman suggests that teachers can assist the work of relaxed parents by helping gifted pupils with the following:

- Learning to set priorities, and face the fact that they can't be perfect in everything

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- Acknowledging that doing difficult things will produce anxiety and frustration (it's normal)
- Reframing mistakes as learning experiences and stepping stones
- Avoiding overcommitting themselves

Fostering their idealism, and willingness to sweat and sacrifice for a vision.



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