

Gifted underachievers

Parent factsheet: Gifted and talented education

Gifted underachievers are defined as those students who have a large difference between potential and performance: that is, their gifts are not effectively developed into talents.

Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talents (read more in the 'What it means if your child is a gifted underachiever parent factsheet') suggest reasons why underachievement happens. If the catalysts or the developmental process is missing, weak, ineffective or not meeting the student's needs over a period, then gifts will not fully develop into talents and underachievement occurs.

To identify a gifted underachiever, you must first identify the giftedness. Parents and carers are very good at recognising giftedness in their children. This can be confirmed by completing checklists and a cognitive assessment (read more in the 'Identification parent factsheet').

Gifted underachievers exist in all communities and are often found within, but not limited to, culturally diverse populations, communities with a low socio-economic status, and individuals with a learning difficulty.

Identifying a gifted underachiever involves measuring the difference between a student's giftedness (ability) and a student's performance. Student voice should be included to assist with identification. The student's performance can be assessed using one of many standardised tests. Schools need to ensure the age, literacy level, cultural background and other characteristics of the students are considered when selecting the test(s). Any resulting difference can be used to confirm underachievement. In addition, gifted individuals who have a specific learning difficulty may also underperform in tests or other usually reliable measures. Careful observation by teachers and parents is a necessary component for determining giftedness. It is important that teachers then identify which adjustments need to be made so that underachieving students move to a successful learning path.

A useful way to understand the feelings, behaviours and needs of gifted students has been developed by Neihart and Betts (2010) in the form of 6 different 'Profiles of the Gifted and Talented'. Five of these profiles are particularly useful for understanding gifted underachievers. Revised Profiles of the Gifted and Talented are detailed below.

Gifted underachievers may share some common motivational and attitudinal characteristics. They may lack the motivation to achieve and will need intervention strategies for their giftedness to be identified.

Gifted underachievers often exhibit low self-esteem. These individuals do not believe they can accomplish what their families or teachers expect of them or what they should expect of themselves; in fact, the low self-esteem they feel may be directly related to the pressures and expectations of being gifted.

Student performance which is noticeably short of potential can be a very frustrating challenge for both teachers and parents or carers. While it may seem difficult to reverse a long-standing pattern of underachievement, there are models or strategies which have proven to be very successful. Successful implementation of such strategies requires collaboration between the school and the student's family. It also requires parents, carers, teachers and other relevant professionals to be patient, dedicated and supportive.

Revised profiles of the gifted and talented

Types 1-5 are profiles of gifted underachievers; an important goal of gifted programs is to assist all gifted students to become Type 6: Autonomous Learners.

Type	Feelings/Attitudes	Behaviours/Characteristics	Needs (at school and at home)
Gifted Underachievers Type 1: The Successful	Type 1 students are bright, motivated achievers. However, their motivation may be directed mainly towards teacher acceptance rather than towards the full development of their high abilities.	Well behaved, conformist; Achieve in schoolwork; Seek approval from teachers and other adults; Neat, tidy bookwork; May be perfectionists; Seek order and structure; Like clear instructions; Do not take risks; May 'achieve' – but at levels significantly below their true ability – at university or in adult life.	Self-knowledge; Independent learning skills; Assertiveness skills; Creativity development; To be challenged; To see deficiencies; To take risks; To develop an incremental view of intelligence (that intelligence can be increased through effort). Risk-taking experiences; Affirmation of their ability to cope with challenges; Independence; Freedom to make choices.
Gifted Underachievers Type 2: The Creative	Type 2 students feel frustrated because the school system does not recognise their high abilities. These students are often overlooked as their impatience can mask their giftedness. They may be bored, angry and resentful and they may 'take it out' on their teachers and other students. This can then further decrease the likelihood of their being identified as gifted.	Can be obstinate, tactless and sarcastic; Question and challenge authority; Can be rude, arrogant; Can be unpopular with peers; Sometimes will buy acceptance as class clown; Do not 'suffer fools gladly'.	To connect with others; To learn tact, flexibility, self-awareness and self-control; Support for creativity; Contractual systems; Less pressure to conform; Interpersonal skills; Strategies to cope with potential psychological vulnerabilities. Affirmation of their strengths; Confidence in their abilities communicated to them; Appropriate behaviour modelled to them; Their goals are to be respected.
Gifted Underachievers Type 3: The Underground	Type 3 students have responded to the 'forced-choice dilemma' – the choice between excelling academically and being accepted by the peer group – by choosing peer acceptance. Unfortunately, they may become afraid that they will lose this acceptance if they drop their camouflage. They can feel conflicted, guilty and insecure. They can have a diminished sense of self.	Conceal ability for peer acceptance; Strong belonging needs; May be insecure and anxious; May feel guilty for denying their gifts.	Freedom to make choices; Conflicts to be made explicit; Support for abilities; Role models who cross cultures; Self-understanding and acceptance; An audience to listen to what they have to say (to be heard); College and career planning; Lifelong learning modelled; Gifted role models provided; Freedom to make choices; Reassurance.

Gifted Underachievers Type 4: The At-Risk	Type 4 students may be physically present in the classroom but intellectually and emotionally have become quite divorced from what is going on in it. They are angry with adults and themselves because the system has not met their needs and they feel rejected. They may express this resentment through withdrawing into themselves and refusing to participate or by acting out and responding defensively.	Can be depressed and withdrawn or angry and defensive; Interests may lie outside curriculum and are not perceived to be valued by teachers or classmates; Extremely low self-esteem; Low performance.	Safety and structure; Professional counselling; An 'alternative' environment; An individualised program; Confrontation and accountability; Direction and short-term goals; Counselling for family; Avoidance of power struggles; To be held accountable but with minimal punishments; Confidence conveyed about their ability to overcome obstacles; To have relationships preserved.
Gifted Underachievers Type 5: The Twice-Multi Exceptional	Type 5 students are gifted students who also have a disability (physical, emotional, learning): for example, a gifted student who is also hearing or visually impaired; a gifted student with Asperger's Syndrome or a gifted student who also has a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia. Often, the focus is on the disability rather than on the whole child.	May display disruptive behaviours through frustration; May be confused about their ability to perform; Can become very frustrated when teachers ignore their gifts and focus only on their disabilities.	Emphasis on strengths: Coping strategies; Skill development; To develop resilience; An environment that develops strengths; To learn to self-advocate; A focus on strengths while accommodating the disability; To develop the will to succeed; To have gifted abilities recognised and affirmed; Risk-taking opportunities provided; Self-control nurtured.
Gifted and Talented Type 6: The Autonomous Learner	Type 6 students have learned how to work effectively in the school system. They are academically successful but may not view academics as one of their highest priorities. They show tolerance and respect for others. They have strong, positive self-concepts and they are able to work cooperatively with teachers to design their personal learning goals. They are willing to fail and learn from it.	Use the system to succeed; Can be confident enough to express their needs and do so in ways that teachers and peers will accept; Independent; Self-directed; Respected and liked by teachers and peers.	More support not less; Advocacy for new directions and increasing independence; Feedback about strengths and possibilities; Facilitation of continuing growth; Support for risk-taking; Ongoing, facilitative relationships; Opportunities related to passion areas; Friends of all ages; No time and space restrictions; Help build a support team; Inclusion in family decision making.

Betts, G.T. & Neihart, M. (2010) Revised profiles of gifted and talented. Retrieved from Ingeniosus, [Revised profiles of the Gifted and Talented - Neihart and Betts.pdf](#)

