

Working with the gifted underachiever: Some do's and don't's

In this Module several major causes of, and factors associated with, underachievement have been discussed, to establish an understanding of the basis of underachievement. In the table below some fundamental do's and don't's with respect to each issue are summarised briefly, along with some recommendations for further reading should you wish to extend your knowledge of particular issues.

| Underachievement Factor | Some Do's | Some Don't's |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Low self-efficacy</p> <p>A useful source of information on this topic is Bandura (1977).</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage the student in mastery activities. Begin at a much lower level of difficulty than the student's potential may appear to warrant. • Provide academic role models the student can relate to. • Maintain high expectations even when the student appears disengaged. Your high expectations are crucial. • Realise that these students will give up quickly and need your support to reach mastery. • Provide performance feedback and praise following mastery. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't give up when the student refuses to engage in mastery activities. Provide all the necessary scaffolding for mastery. • Don't start these students at difficulty levels that appear to suit their level of giftedness. • Don't give unearned praise. |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Dysfunctional perfectionism</p> <p>A useful source of information on this topic is Silverman (1999).</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realise that perfectionism can have very positive outcomes and is only a problem when it leads to a student failing to appreciate her own competency or adequacy. • Allow the student to experience failure in a way that is non-threatening, eg in some non-academic activity. • Encourage the student to experiment and treat unsuccessful outcomes as simply a learning experience. • Encourage the student to engage in tasks that can only be done in small steps, eg learning to play a musical instrument. • Use bibliotherapy (see below) to assist the student to grow in a socio-emotional sense and to become aware that other gifted people exist and have similar challenges. <p>Bibliotherapy involves using book characters (fiction or non-fiction) to enable students to compare themselves vicariously (and therefore in a less confronting way) with others who may have had similar feelings, problems and experiences. Teachers can invite students to reflect on and discuss characters' actions and their consequences, as a means of gaining insights into their own behaviour.</p> <p>A useful source of information on bibliotherapy is Colangelo (2003).</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't expect too much from the student simply because she is academically gifted. |
|--|---|---|

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Boredom</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware that some students may claim to be bored as a mask to hide stresses such as a fear of failure. • Be aware that a lack of engagement or poor behaviour may reflect genuine boredom. • In 'invisible' underachievers expressions of boredom can easily be misinterpreted as poor behaviour, because of their unrecognised academic potential. Do investigate further. • Provide tasks whose difficulty level matches the student's ability level. • Use open-ended tasks to allow the student to extend herself. • Allow the student to pick his own areas of interest. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't expect a gifted student to be enthusiastic about lessons that contain tasks he mastered long ago. |
| <p>Dominant visual-spatial (VS) learners</p> <p>A useful source of information on this topic is Silverman's website.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realise that visual-spatial learners learn holistically rather than step by step. • Realise that most current educational practices utilise a step by step approach, thus disadvantaging the VS learner and increasing the likelihood of underachievement. • Establish close liaison with the student's parents. • Help the student realise she is quite normal but has a different learning style. • Group VS learners together where possible. • Use hands-on and visual approaches. • Use computers. • Provide tasks that require creativity. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't use rote memorisation and drill. • Don't expect timed tests to produce valid outcomes. • Don't stress the student's weaknesses, such as poor handwriting. |