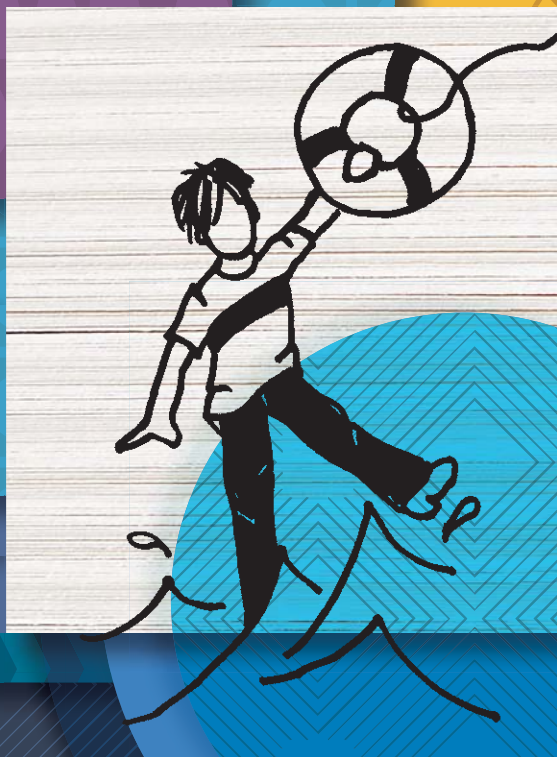
JAMES R. DELISLE

DOING POORLY ON PURPOSE

Strategies to Reverse Underachievement and Respect Student Dignity



ASCD®
1703 N. Beauregard St.
Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA
Phone: 800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600
Fax: 703-575-5400
Website: www.ascd.org
E-mail: member@ascd.org
Author guidelines: www.ascd.org/write

free spirit PUBLISHING®
6325 Sandburg Road, Ste. 100
Minneapolis, MN 55427-3674 USA
Website: www.freespirit.com

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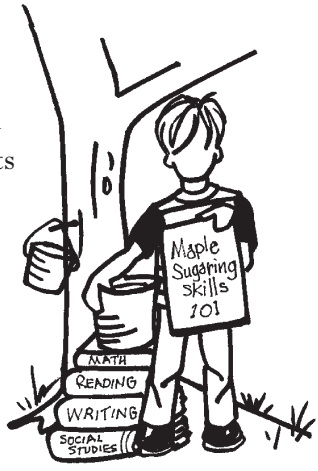
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Preface

When I met Matt, he was a 5th grader and I was a first-year teacher. To Matt, school was irrelevant, and he told me so every day by writing that very word—spelled correctly and in red crayon—across the top of any assignment he found personally distasteful. More often than I can recount, Matt would then turn his red-crayoned message into a paper airplane and land it expertly on the top of my desk, causing my heart to sink and my frustrations to rise. I was stymied, as nothing I was told to do in my education courses—ignore his behavior, reward compliance, have a one-on-one meeting with Matt—worked. We had a very bad year . . . until March.

On a cold morning that could not rightfully be called spring in the northern New Hampshire town where I taught, Matt entered my classroom having just been sprayed by a skunk. It might be hard to believe, but this smelly incident changed my career and, I hope, Matt's education forever. Here's how.



Matt had been checking on his backyard "business" of maple sugar farming. Maple sap starts to flow as the days get a tad longer and warmer, and Matt was checking on the buckets attached to his sugar maples to see how much bounty he'd collected. He had signed contracts with neighbors to tap their trees in return for some of the syrup he and his dad would make from the collected sap that they distilled into sweet, liquid sugar. He was also trying (in vain) to sell his product at our town's single grocery store, but he couldn't do so without

having his syrup OK'd for quality by the state department of agriculture. The skunk came into play due to the fact that maple sugaring season also happens to be mating season for these smelly carnivores, and Matt had inadvertently waltzed between two amorous skunks that were seeking a bit of privacy.

Hence, he got sprayed.

Matt and I talked (downwind) about this incident and decided, together, that maple sugar would become a main focus of his curriculum. This was hardly something I could have planned in advance; rather, it was my desperate attempt to salvage even a bit of learning from this misbegotten school year. So, from that day forward, Matt's math assignments changed from engaging in rote drills to more relevant tasks, such as making change and converting volume amounts. Reading and writing assignments involved filling out invoices and making posters to advertise his product. A major social studies assignment evolved into a photo essay highlighting his maple sugar farming skills (complete with an original script), presented in the now-quaint carousel slide projector technology of the 1970s. Science involved talking to a mentor from the community who was an established maple sugar farmer and would help Matt gain the state department of agriculture's stamp of approval (which happened two years later). Matt even spoke at a Rotary Club luncheon where, truth be told, he listened to old war stories and contributed a tasteless joke or two to the colorful discussion. All in all, we ended our time together that year on much sounder footing than how we began.

Was Matt an underachiever prior to this maple syrup epiphany? I think not. Rather, I believe Matt was "selective"—not "turned off"—when it came to his education. What Matt needed was a reason to learn, a reason to care about school, and a purpose that went beyond what he perceived as stale textbooks. Almost like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Matt found the magic of learning to be right in his own backyard—not a Kansas cornfield but a New Hampshire sugar maple grove called home.

Today, Matt is living in Alaska among the woods he has always loved and is more than 50 years old. Thanks to Matt, I came to appreciate early in my career that "underachievement" is a whole lot more complex than just doing poorly in school. Its foundation is something much more basic: dignity, or the lack thereof, that kids such as Matt believe is absent from this educational enterprise we call school.

In the following pages, I wish to present you with a snapshot of underachievement that may look far different from what you envision it to be. While giving you practical solutions to reach these students, I ask you to open yourself up and allow a new perspective on this perplexing problem that has dogged the lives of smart, poorly performing kids for far too long.

One logistical point: throughout this book, you will read about the experiences of various students I've had the honor and pleasure to teach or counsel. Portions of some of these student examples have appeared in a few of my previous books (especially the cases of Marty and Sierra that I present in Chapter 1), and many of the examples I use are "composites" of several students whose individual stories are rolled into one story. I have no doubt that you'll also see several of your own students through my examples.

1

Underachievement: Viewing It from a Student's Perspective

Let's begin with a quick word association. When I say *underachiever*, what other terms come to mind? My hunch is that words such as *lazy*, *unmotivated*, *bored*, and *slacker* are near the top of the list, none of which is positive. Now imagine that you are this smart kid who doesn't do well in school. Teachers, counselors, and parents all come together with collective anxiety that you are "wasting your potential" by not doing work that you are certainly capable of completing.

This is an important point. It's not that the schoolwork you are being asked to do is too challenging or difficult—in fact, it's just the opposite. The mind-numbing assignments you could finish off in minutes remain undone because you see no point in doing them. If you continue to get *A*s and *B*s on quizzes and tests—which you most often could do—then why do you have to complete homework and in-class tasks that are really designed for students who haven't yet grasped the content as well as you have? You feel like you're being punished for knowing stuff that classmates are still trying to master.

And this issue didn't just appear suddenly in middle or high school. No, the genesis of your dissatisfaction began long ago, in situations such as the following:

In 2nd grade, I had already read the *Harry Potter* books, and circle reading in class was painful for me. "Animals live all over the world. Some places are cold while others are not. The Arctic is cold and snowy." Sentences like these just don't compare to sentences like "The two men appeared out of nowhere, a few yards apart in the narrow, moonlit lane."

But in 2nd grade (and 3rd and 4th) you likely keep much of your academic dissatisfaction to yourself. You might tell your parents and friends that school is "boring," but hey . . . everyone thinks that, right? So you continue to turn in addition and subtraction worksheets even though you've been doing complex multiplication for a year already. Spelling words such as *world* and *planet* come easily to you since you are in the midst of watching Neil deGrasse Tyson's *Cosmos* on YouTube. Needless to say, your perfect spelling tests don't matter to you at all.

So you begin to wonder, "Maybe it's me." If almost everyone else seems satisfied with the level of work he or she is being asked to complete, maybe *you're* the one who has a problem. But as your body and mind continue to mature and you enter middle school, you begin to realize that your academic desires are higher than those of many of your classmates'. You want your education to be relevant and interesting: two qualities sadly lacking in the curriculum you are expected to complete.

With that in mind, you begin to disassociate from classmates whose knowledge base is lower than yours, and you tune out most class lessons and only listen to your teachers when a topic seems intriguing or important to you personally. You long to be anywhere

but in English class, and your reactions become unmistakable. That's when the anxious teachers, counselors, and parents convene on your behalf. You're told that when you finish school and begin to work, some elements of your job will be boring, too, yet they still have to be done. You think to yourself, "Yeah, but if I'm bored every day like I am now in school, I'll look for a new job." But leaving school in 7th grade? I don't think so.

The downward spiral continues, and everyone in this situation ultimately ends up frustrated. Where do you go from here? Before we get to some possible solutions, let's dissect this thing called underachievement in more detail.

Special Education of a Different Sort

Although the first book specifically targeting underachievement—*Bright Underachievers* (Raph, Goldberg, & Passow, 1966)—was published more than 50 years ago, the issue of smart students getting poor grades has certainly existed long before then. Logically speaking, it's only to be expected that when you put a diverse group of people in any learning situation, some individuals will be more skilled and attentive than others. And if modifications are made so that people are allowed—indeed, encouraged—to learn at their own pace while exploring topics of personal interest, then underachievement is not likely to be a big issue.

However, when this set of diverse learners happens to be students in a classroom where individual needs and abilities are not accommodated fully, then it's the students on the edges—those with learning difficulties and with intellectual giftedness—who most often lose out on learning at levels that are personally appropriate. To address this reality, our nation allocates billions of dollars annually to help students with disabilities and learning difficulties, hoping that adequate interventions will help them achieve at levels they might not otherwise reach. This money is both well spent and well deserved.

But money for smart students—those who score in the top 5 percent on standardized tests of achievement or aptitude—is sorely limited by comparison. Unfortunately, virtually no federal funds exist specifically for educating gifted children, and only modest state and local funds—if any—target this population. Whereas students with learning difficulties get sympathy and empathy from a generous public that wants them to do well, the most academically capable students—especially those who do poorly in school—are often told to "get over themselves" and just buckle down and do their assignments. Very little sympathy or empathy is extended to these students. Why? Because the public in general thinks that gifted students are smart and can "make it on their own."

But perhaps our dismissal of students who underachieve is misplaced, as evidenced by this quote from educational pioneer James J. Gallagher (1975):

> Failure to help the gifted child reach his potential is a societal tragedy, the extent of which is difficult to measure but which is surely great. How can we measure the sonata unwritten, the curative drug undiscovered, the absence of political insight? They are the difference between what we are and what we could be as a society. (p. 9)

Our nation and our world are not so well off that we can readily dismiss the very real needs of smart kids who do poorly in school. Just as students who underachieve may need to cut educators a little slack when it comes to making every lesson as exciting as an episode of your favorite show, so must the adults in these kids' lives be willing to listen to the legitimate issues often raised by kids who do poorly on purpose.

A Little More History

> What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—other (nations) are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. . . . If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might very well have viewed it as an act of war. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 9)

This observation, from the landmark *A Nation at Risk* report, offered a scathing indictment of much of America's educational system and practices. Among the findings specific to the topic of underachievement, the Commission found that

- More than half of identified gifted students did not match their tested ability through their school performance.
- The majority of secondary school students had mastered 80 percent of the content of their textbooks *before* ever opening them for the school year.
- School curricula, for the most part, focused on memorization and acquisition of low-level skills, not on problem solving and analysis.

Stating that American education offered a "rising tide of mediocrity" (p. 9) to its students, the Commission determined that much curricula was about a mile wide and an inch deep, barely scratching the surface of in-depth analysis that many highly capable students desire. Given this situation, one might say that underachievement is learned by many because it is taught so well in schools.

I know. I'm going to be criticized for highlighting these generation-old data, but if you presented today's underachieving students with these findings and asked them to guess when they were compiled, many might assume it was last week—not last century.

For a while, *A Nation at Risk* caused eruptions of anger and no small amount of hand wringing from politicians and educators over how to address the issues it raised. However, as often happens with government publications and initiatives, very little actual long-term progress was made. In 1995, David Berliner and Bruce Biddle actually took exception to the Commission's findings, calling them politically motivated results that engineered a manufactured crisis in education. John Goodlad (2003) disagreed with this assertion and supported the Commission's work, yet he commented that the report had plenty of smoke but no flames. And in a 25-year retrospective offered by former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, the U.S. Department of Education (2008) maintained that "we remain a nation at risk, but now we are a nation informed, a nation accountable, and a nation that recognizes there is much work to be done" (p. 1). You'd think that after 25 years, Spellings could have offered more specifics and fewer platitudes.

What do these findings have to do with the topic of underachieving students who brought you to read this book in the first place? Just about everything. Indeed, smart students who do poorly on purpose may be the educational equivalent of canaries in a coal mine—students who, despite being academically capable, refuse to do schoolwork that lacks both challenge or relevance and, in doing so, are warning others to "get out fast." As averse as some educators may be to taking guidance from smart students whose academic performance is minimal, these very students may be the ones whose ideas for improving education can offer some positive paths forward.

Underachievement is more than getting lower grades than you are capable of achieving. Indeed, it is a complex issue that involves personal interpretation and nuance, as described in the rest of this book.

More Conundrum Than Consensus

My Aunt Peggy was a sweet woman, but when it came to my career decision, she was not shy about telling me that she thought I had really underplayed the cards I'd been dealt. Always a smart kid in school, I earned a PhD in educational psychology at the age of 28. I was thrilled (if tired), and my parents were equally ecstatic—I was and remain the first and only member of my extended family to receive a doctorate.

At my celebration party, Aunt Peggy sat me down and told me how proud she was of me and how much good credit I had given to our family name. Then she dropped her bombshell: "You were always a smart kid, Jimmy, so it's a shame you didn't decide to become a *real* doctor. You know, a medical doctor—the kind of doctor who really helps people."

Until the day she died, Aunt Peggy considered me an underachiever. Mind you, she had never ventured beyond high school herself, but her opinion of my doctorate was undercut by her unwillingness to consider a PhD a worthwhile degree for "a smart kid" like me.

Issue 1: Underachievement is often a phenomenon based on personal opinion rather than established norms.

Consider this: in your life as an educator (or counselor or parent) I'm sure you have known students who consider a grade of *B+* to be low, whereas another student who gets a *D–* will remind you that it's still a passing grade. So, when it comes to grades, where does underachievement stop and achievement begin? And does context matter? Is a lower grade in an honors or AP class "better" than a higher grade in a standard class? How proud should students be when they get high grades in a class where they didn't learn anything new?

These issues are often sidestepped when we discuss grades with students who are not performing academically at levels their intelligence indicates they are capable of achieving. Instead, we tell them to "try your best" or to "work up to your potential"—two statements that are banal suggestions with absolutely no specificity. Students need specificity.

Issue 2: There is no such thing as a "classic underachiever."

Every so-called underachiever with whom I have worked is good at some things that either don't get recognized or acknowledged as important by adults. Yes, they may be doing poorly in regular school classes, but ask about their National History Day project they've been working on for almost a year and you'll see eyes widen and ears perk to attention. They may be earning a *C*– in Algebra II, but the Internet business they began on their own? It's up, running, and successful.

Repeat this mantra: "no one—*no one*—is good or bad at everything." When we use the term *classic underachiever*, the presumption is that this lack of success is pervasive, not content or situation specific. Nevertheless, I would say that 99 times out of 100, underachievement is dependent on factors other than intelligence. The same student who will walk on nails for a teacher who asks, "What are you interested in learning and how can I help you achieve your goals?" will dismiss a teacher who says, "I don't care how smart you think you are, *all* of my students need to turn in their homework. Review and practice are good for you."

The word *dignity* appears in the subtitle of this book for a reason. If smart students don't feel that they are getting it from those in charge of their learning, then their desire to conform and achieve is minimized. By asking capable students to complete assignments that are several strata below their abilities, we ignore the very qualities that got them identified as intelligent in the first place. Where's the dignity in *that*?

Issue 3: Underachievement may be caused by one or more of the following: lack of interest, lack of challenge, lack of self-esteem, or a desire to receive negative attention over none at all.

A third reason why underachievement has been so hard to address successfully has to do with its genesis—its origins. In some ways, underachievement is akin to a skin rash. The symptoms may look the same on different people, yet the underlying causes of the rash (or the underachievement) might be very different. Alternatively, underachievement can be like an onion, a multitiered phenomenon with so many layers that the more you peel away, the more you find underneath. Underachievement also often appears as a labyrinth, with so many paths to go down that you don't know which ones will lead to success and which will lead to dead ends until you try multiple possibilities.

The lack of interest or challenge has already been addressed, and the low self-esteem issue will be dealt with in a later section, but the desire for negative attention over none at all is one of critical importance that is seldom addressed.

Let's go to a classic movie as an example: *The Breakfast Club*. During a weakly monitored Saturday detention at the fictitious Shermer High School, a group composed of an athlete, a "smart kid," a stoner, a rebel, and a princess reveal just how much they have in common despite their outward personae that scream "I'm different than all of you." The rebel, John Bender (played by Judd Nelson), has a dad who beats him, a false and scary bravado, and no positive relationships with any adult. Why should he? He's been written off by practically everyone as a loser, yet the desire to be included—to be somebody who matters—is as much a part of his human nature as it is for the school's most successful students. Since he can't get positive attention, he decides to get as much negative attention as he can. He'll do anything to feel relevant.

With some underachievers, their quest for relevance is not fictional but very real. Why not address it directly? Jean Peterson (2008), a school counselor and author who understands underachievers from the inside out, suggests having "*Breakfast Club*–like" discussions with teens that focus on questions such as these (p. 32):

- Where in your life are you letting your intelligence show?
- Who in your life believes you are an intelligent person?
- What is the most comfortable part of school? The least comfortable?
- What are your feelings about being labeled an 'underachiever'?
- What would happen if you started achieving in school?
- When you underachieve, who gives you attention?
- Who are you being loyal to by underachieving?
- What are you sacrificing by underachieving?

Almost more than anything else, highly able teens who do not achieve want something they frequently lack: an adult who cares about who they are, not just how well they do in school. This lack of bonding with an adult is one of the main reasons why solving the issue of underachievement is so difficult, and it will be one of the primary foci of this book.

A Few More Psychological Factors to Consider

Of course, we cannot clump all underachievers into one big pool of disappointing school performers. Some underachieve chronically, year after year, and no amount of counseling or cajoling seems to help. Other students underachieve for a very good reason (e.g., a family divorce, a move to a new school, a teenage love affair gone sour). In these instances, the underachievement is often temporary as school takes on less importance when other aspects of their lives are causing personal turmoil.

In addition, some students who could shine academically choose not to do so unless they are assured of being the top student in class. This can occur in honors or AP courses, where the level of academic rigor is high and student competition to get top grades borders on maniacal. In these situations, a student who fears getting anything less than a top grade might actually opt to put minimal effort into the workload. A resulting low grade of *C* or *D* elicits comments such as "You could have done better than this" from adults, and to this point, the student agrees. But guess what? For students expected to get *A*s, a grade of *C* might actually be safer and more satisfying, psychologically speaking, than a *B+*. In essence, it feels better (temporarily) to come closer to failure than to the success others expect you to achieve.

There is actually a term for this phenomenon: *counterfactual thinking*. It is when a person's emotional response to disappointing events is influenced by his or her thoughts about "what might have been." To wit, psychology researchers from Cornell University published a study in which they videotaped and then analyzed the facial expressions of silver and bronze medal winners at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona (Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995). Almost without fail, the bronze medal winners showed "Duchenne smiles," which is a scientific way of saying that a smile is genuine and not forced, whereas the silver medal winners had smiles that were polite but not real. Similar studies were done at the 1994 Empire State Games and the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens with similar results: Duchenne smiles for third-place finishers and fake smiles from those winning silver.

So what's the conclusion? Those who are objectively better off in terms of success but still not the best (e.g., a silver medalist, a kid with an 89-percent average) feel worse than those who don't achieve as strongly (e.g., a bronze medalist, a student who squeaked by with an 81-percent average). Counterfactual thinking is an undiscussed reality that affects the attitude and performance of many an underachiever.

A related phenomenon can occur when highly able students get their wishes granted and are placed in classes where they are finally learning something new and being challenged. What seems like a dream come true can be, for students more afraid of academic failure than they thought they were, their biggest nightmare. Why? Because now, for maybe the first time in their academic careers, they might not be the smartest one in the class. They might not be able to ace exams without studying. They might now have the *need* to study but, because they've never had to do so before, they don't know *how* to study.

All of this can lead to something I call the "Bottom of the Top" syndrome, where students recognize that they had to be smart to enroll in a particular course but, as they look around the classroom, they believe that everyone else is going to be smarter than they are, so . . . why try at all? This self-doubt, which is generally never discussed with students, could be the catalyst for a downward spiral of grades and academic expectations. Self-sabotage (defined as behavior that creates problems and interferes with long-standing goals) is rearing its ugly head.

I've seen this situation firsthand in my part-time role as a high school teacher for highly gifted teens. Located on a college campus, this small, public school with only 200 students attracts what others call "the best and the brightest" from our county. Me? I just call them smart adolescents who need a challenge and a place to feel at home both socially and intellectually. Working primarily with incoming 9th graders, I try to help students see how they can balance academics with other life aspects (e.g., sports, band, free time with family and friends), which is a challenge for many since their freshman year is often filled with honors and AP classes and with for-credit college courses. Academic expectations are high from every direction—from their parents, from their teachers and professors, and—especially—from themselves.

During my first day with students, I distribute a 10-item checklist. "What do freshmen worry about most when starting at our school?" I ask them to complete the list anonymously.

- I will fail, so why should I even be coming here?
- I'm really not gifted, it's just a label people pin on me to get me to work hard.
- I won't find any friends who really "get" me.
- I'll have to fake who I am if I want to fit in.
- I will be bored—as usual—in my classes.
- I will feel more pressure to perform because I'm in a "gifted school."
- I've never had to study before to get good grades, so I don't know *how* to study.
- I'm going to be intimidated sitting next to college students in class.
- I'm going to be so busy with academics that I won't have time to do anything fun.
- I'm probably going to be the dumbest of the smart kids.

Once they're finished, I ask students to close their eyes as I read each statement and raise their hands for any they've identified as being of personal concern. Without fail, the statement that garners the most concern is "I'm probably going to be the dumbest of the smart kids." About 70 percent of students indicate this as a fear. With their eyes now wide open—literally and figuratively—I remind them that it is statistically impossible for 70 percent of them to be the dumbest of the smart kids, and this is the beginning of a series of discussions we have about the effect the "Bottom of the Top" syndrome can have on their success and self-esteem.

To be sure, this is not a school for students who underachieve chronically, and those few who do not succeed academically are counseled to return to their base high schools. Still, the importance of discussing the possibility of disappointing yourself or others with a "dreadful" grade (a *B+* or *C–*, depending on the student)

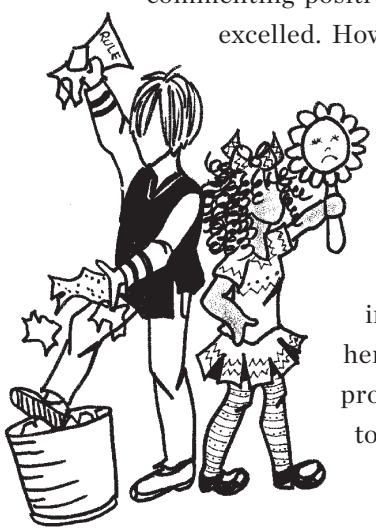
is paramount to getting students to accept personal disappointment and vulnerability. It's also one among many reasons why raising the issue of "failure" with students and their parents makes much more sense than ignoring it.

The many possible causes of bright students performing poorly have made the issue of underachievement a puzzle that won't go away. Before going any further, let's try to separate the many varieties of underachievers into two categories, both of which you have undoubtedly seen in your classrooms, homes, or counseling offices.

Underachiever or Selective Consumer? Two Sides of a Complicated Coin

Sierra is a 5th grader who wishes she was as smart as her teachers say she is. Year after year, teachers have commented that Sierra's insecurities about her abilities really hold her back when it comes to excelling academically. A quiet girl, Sierra never causes trouble in class; in fact, above all else, she values her teachers' approval and just wants to please them—she just doesn't believe she is competent enough to do so.

Teachers have tried to persuade Sierra that she is smart by commenting positively on tests or projects where she has excelled. However, Sierra dismisses these accolades and takes no personal responsibility for her academic successes. She says, "I just got lucky, I guess." However, when Sierra does not do well on an assignment, it just reinforces her already low opinion of her abilities; she internalizes this weak performance, calls herself dumb, and shies away from future projects that she thinks will be too difficult to complete.



Sierra really does want to do better in school than her low grades indicate, but she claims she can't. Some might think that Sierra is a nice, quiet girl who just lacks confidence, but the truth is that Sierra is a sad girl who cannot seem to get beyond her own self-criticism, which is keeping her from succeeding as her teachers believe she can.

Sierra is an underachiever, right?

Marty is a 7th grader who most teachers hear about before he ever reaches their classroom door. Comments such as "He's a smart kid who always thinks he's right—watch out for him" and "He'll do great work one day and no work the next—I can't figure this kid out" pervade teacher-lounge conversations.

To be sure, teaching Marty can lead to frustration. On some days, he'll come to class and lead an animated discussion on a topic of personal interest, whereas other days he'll just sit there with an "I dare you to teach me something" look in his eyes.

Marty dislikes busywork and the teachers who assign it, and he seldom turns in homework that he could complete in no time flat. This, of course, makes assigning grades to Marty difficult, for even if he's proven that he knows the material, how can he be rewarded with high grades if he doesn't hand in basic homework assignments? It wouldn't be fair to the other, more compliant students. This situation frustrates nearly everyone—except Marty. He knows that he's smart, and he also knows he could get straight *A*s if he "played school by the rules." But he honestly doesn't care about good grades; he loves to learn, but if Marty feels he is just jumping through hoops to earn them, he'd rather not play the school game by someone else's rules.

Some teachers think that Marty is rebelling for the sake of rebelling and that if he isn't willing to cut them a little slack, then they're not going to cut him any, either. A few, though, recognize that Marty is just fed up with "learning" material that he mastered long ago, so they try to meet him halfway and not get into power struggles where everyone loses.

Marty is an underachiever, right?

If you examined Sierra's and Marty's report cards, you wouldn't notice much difference; both would indicate smart students who are underperforming. However, as my mother was fond of saying, "these two are as different as chalk and cheese." Treating them the same, similar grades notwithstanding, would be a disservice to them both.

Let's now examine how Sierra and Marty—and the countless others like them—differ in both observable and unseen ways. First, let's consider the dynamics behind Sierra's lack of achievement. By her own admission, Sierra doesn't understand why she isn't performing well in school. Dependent on teacher feedback, Sierra internalizes only the negatives about her school progress. Seldom if ever confrontational, she has great respect for her teachers and feels badly that she is disappointing them. She does best when her assignments are short-term and highly structured, yet her grades vary little across subject areas. She believes she is equally bad in everything she does academically. Ironically, though, Sierra tends toward perfectionism, preferring not to turn in an assignment at all rather than risk having it be lacking in quality. This poor academic self-image has been a long-term issue for Sierra, and her teachers have met frequently with her parents and school counselors in hopes of getting this intelligent girl to appreciate, even a little, the abilities she has. So far, nothing seems to have worked for more than a short period of time.

Given these characteristics and qualities, I would label Sierra as an underachiever. The issues she confronts daily go far beyond the quality of her schoolwork, as her self-concept as a learner is extremely low and the helplessness she feels in making things better is genuine. More an issue of counseling than teaching, Sierra will require a long-term, committed strategy to avoid falling back further in subsequent years.

Then there's Marty. He'll explain to anyone who cares to listen why he is not doing well in most school subjects—the material is

irrelevant or boring, and he believes most teachers are there simply to collect a paycheck. He has a definite independent streak and tends to rebel when placed in an academic setting that he finds stultifying. Teachers are his adversaries until they've been proven otherwise, but once Marty accepts a teacher as someone who listens to him and cares about what *he* cares about, he will become (for the most part) a compliant, successful student. Although Marty needs some structure, he is comfortable with more amorphous, ill-defined assignments or projects, often bringing a creative spin to his work that surprises his teachers and causes them to ask, "Why can't he *always* turn in work like this?"

Marty considers himself academically capable, yet his grades are all over the place—one year he'll earn an *A* in math, and the next year a *C* or *D*. The reason? He performs well for teachers who treat him respectfully as an intelligent person and dismisses those who don't. Perfection is seldom a part of Marty's academic repertoire, unless it is a project of his own design in which his time and talents are heavily invested. Although most teachers dread the thought of having Marty in their classrooms, a few see him as a rebel with a cause—an agent with a mission—who strives to take the best from school and leave the rest behind. Counseling has been tried sporadically but with little progress. After all, Marty *knows* what is expected of him in school; he just chooses to play by his own rules.

Marty's scenario suggests that he is not the underachiever people claim he is. Rather, Marty is a *selective consumer* who is quite picky about when he will perform academically and when he won't. To be sure, there are adults who worry that Marty will become a belligerent adult who refuses to conform to society's rules, making him incapable of taking orders, holding down a job, or being committed to any long-term personal relationships. Those who believe this about Marty want to control and contain him *now* . . . before it's too late. The trouble with this approach is that Marty refuses to buy into a system that wants *him* to do all the changing—where's the dignity in that? Instead, a less-confrontational, hands-off manner in which

Marty is presented with his options and their consequences is the type of realistic approach that is likely to do more good than harm.

Underachievers and selective consumers—chalk and cheese, indeed.

In subsequent chapters, I will address the fundamentals of dealing with both types of learners, although I will focus more attention on the students who come onto our radars pretty quickly: the Martys of the world. It is not that underachievers such as Sierra should be ignored—indeed, in the long run, her problems may go deeper and far beyond schoolwork concerns. However, selective consumers like Marty are the ones who have been lost to a school system that demands conformity and imposes punishments and contracts that never get to the heart of the issue that causes selective consumers to rebel in the first place.

I feel more sympathy for Sierra than I do for Marty, as she is as emotionally fragile as Marty is strong. However, every teacher and counselor wants to help Sierra succeed, and there is little disagreement that she needs consistent and caring guidance. On the other hand, many teachers and counselors are apt to write Marty off as a spoiled renegade if their initial attempts to get him to improve his attitude and grades fall short of success. In the long run, both Sierra and Marty need our support, just in very different ways.

Summary

Why is it that concepts that seem so obvious and clear upon first glance become less obvious and muddier the more they are examined? Such is the case with the term *underachievement*, which, when defined simplistically, refers to a student with high intellectual aptitude who performs academically far below tested abilities. The deeper you dig, though, the more you realize that this simple concept of underachievement may be precise and measurable, but it is also too narrow for those trying to help these so-called underachievers.

Ultimately, underachievement comes in many forms. A solution for one won't necessarily work for another, and even though weak academic performance seems to be the common denominator, the reasons behind students' low achievement vary considerably. Students such as Sierra crave teacher support and guidance, whereas students such as Marty often shun both. Sierra will be the first to point out how poor a student she is, but Marty will pity the teachers who aren't bright enough to realize just how smart *he* really is. Sierra dismisses any comment from adults that focuses on her strengths and sporadic high academic performance, yet Marty will be happy to let you know that the low grades he earns in class are justified, given the lame assignments he is expected to complete.

In unique ways, both Sierra and Marty feel like victims. Sierra is a victim of her own poor self-concept as a learner, which prevents her from doing a level of work that teachers believe she is competent of performing. Marty feels victimized by not receiving the credit he deserves—the *dignity* he deserves—to have his many strengths acknowledged even when he doesn't complete his teachers' most basic assignments.

The search for solutions for both Sierra and Marty will be filled with as many pitfalls as triumphs, yet if the end result is that these two very different types of underachievers start to succeed on both their own terms and those of their teachers, then the efforts we make to help them will be worth the long trek down a path that is often unclear.

Let the journey for solutions begin.

About the Author



Dr. James (Jim) R. Delisle has taught gifted children and those who work on their behalf for more than 39 years. Jim retired from Kent State University in 2008 after 25 years of service there as a distinguished professor of special education. Throughout his career, Jim has taken time away from college teaching to return to his "classroom roots," volunteering as a 2nd, 4th, 5th, and 8th grade teacher in 1991, 1997, and 2006. Jim has also taught gifted middle school students one day a week between 1998–2008 in the Twinsburg, Ohio, public schools. For the past six years, Jim has worked part time with highly gifted 9th and 10th graders at the Scholars' Academy in Conway, South Carolina.

The author of more than 250 articles and 20 books, Jim's work has been translated into multiple languages and has been featured in both professional journals and popular media, such as *The New York Times*, *People*, and on Oprah! A frequent presenter throughout the United States, Jim has also addressed audiences in nations as diverse as the United Kingdom, Greece, China, Oman, Turkey, New Zealand, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.