



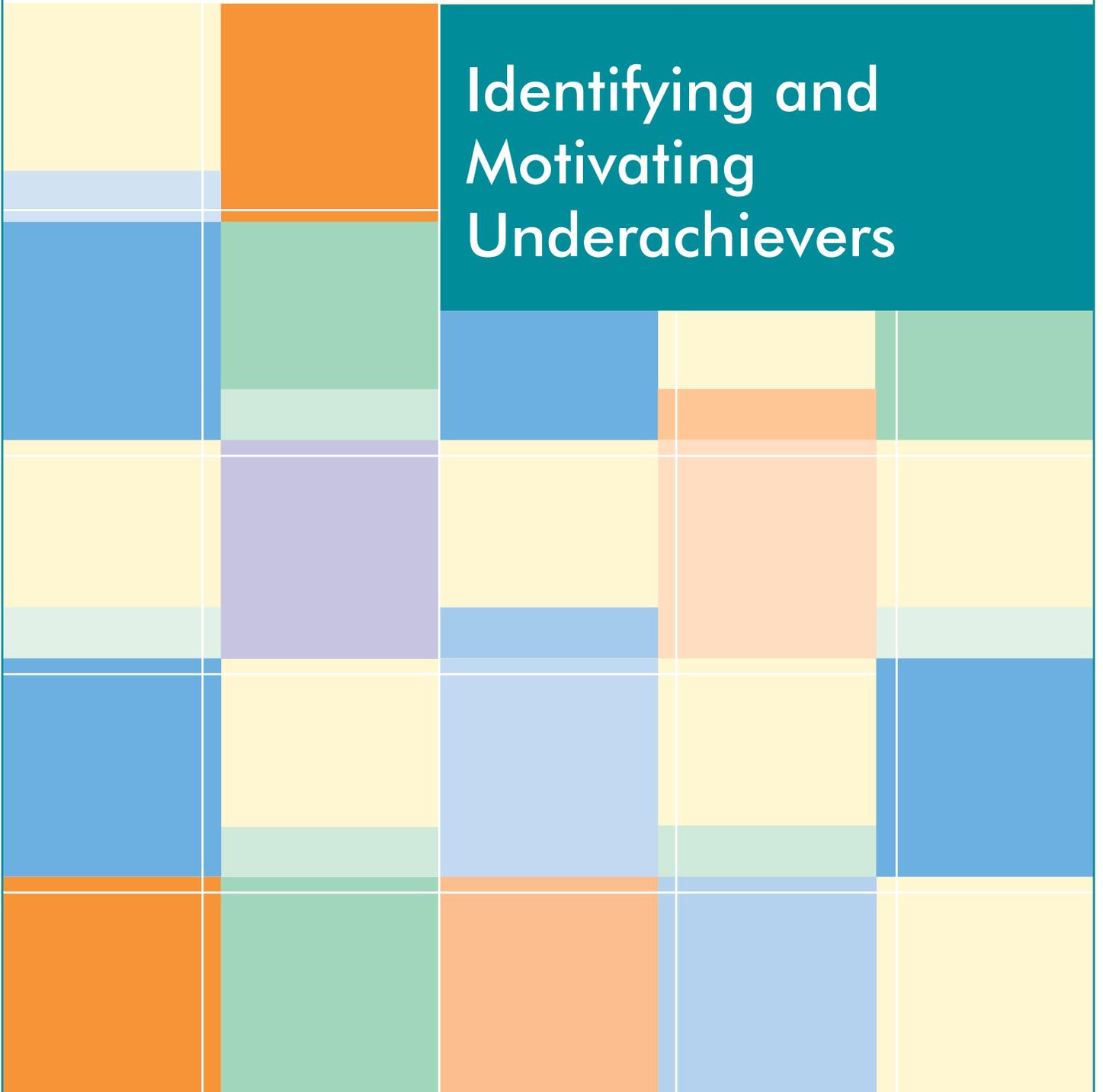
ERS

EDUCATIONAL
RESEARCH SERVICE
www.ers.org

FOCUS ON

*Professional development tools
for dynamic teaching*

Identifying and Motivating Underachievers



Educational Research Service

The Information Source for School Decisions

Table of Contents

Debunking the Underachievement Myths.....	1
One Size Does Not Fit All	4
Meeting a Student’s Physical Needs	5
Addressing a Student’s Emotional Needs	5
How to Create a Motivating Classroom.....	8
Collaboration and Cooperative Learning Groups.....	8
Use Clear Directives.....	9
Organizing Materials and Assignments.....	10
Set Learning Goals	11
Capitalize on Intrinsic Motivation.....	11
Conferencing and Coaching One-on-One	12
Focus on Mastery	12
Treat Each Student Equally	13
Active Learning	14
Appropriate Praise.....	14
Modeling Motivation.....	14
Learning Styles and the Underachiever	15
Labeling and the Underachiever	16
Learning Disabilities	16
Attention Deficit Disorder.....	16
Gifted Students	17
Summary	17
References.....	18
Books in Brief.....	20
Web Resources.....	21
Related ERS Resources.....	21

© 2010 Educational Research Service

Educational Research Service is the nonprofit organization providing school leaders with essential research for effective decisions. Contact ERS to learn how you can benefit from online and print services and resources available through an annual subscription. Or visit us online at www.ers.org for an overview of the wealth of preK-12 resources available from ERS.

ERS Founding Organizations:

American Association of School Administrators
American Association of School Personnel Administrators
Association of School Business Officials
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National School Public Relations Association

ERS Executive Staff:

John C. Draper, Ed.D, Chief Executive Officer
Katherine A. Behrens, Chief Operating Officer

Author:

Michelle Layer Rahal

Editor:

Tracy Pastian

Focus On is published six times a year by Educational Research Service. It is available for purchase at the list price of \$90 for a package of 15 copies. School District subscriber price: \$45 for a package of 15 copies. Stock #0787.

Order from: Educational Research Service, 1001 N. Fairfax St., Suite 500, Alexandria, VA 22314-1587. Phone: 800-791-9308. Fax: 800-791-9309. Email: ers@ers.org. Web site: www.ers.org. Add the greater of \$4.50 or 10% of total purchase price for shipping and handling. VISA, MasterCard, and American Express accepted.

The inclusion of any specific assertion or opinion in *ERS Focus On* is not intended to imply approval or endorsement by ERS or any ERS founding organization.

Focus On:

Identifying and Motivating Underachievers

“You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.” Why do some students turn in quality work while others do just enough to get by? Why are some students able to verbalize great intentions but fail miserably on their assigned projects? Why can the simplest of assignments be met with great dissension? For a variety of reasons, there can be a significant gap between what underachieving students produce in school and what they are actually capable of producing.

Such underachieving students have often been labeled as “lazy” or “difficult.” Teachers have been known to write them off as “unteachable.”

Students underachieve for a variety of reasons, the least of which is because they are lazy, difficult, unteachable, or learning disabled. The challenge for each and every teacher is to find the individual key that unlocks a child’s motivation to succeed and build on that foundation. One thing is certain: teachers cannot expect to use a one-size-fits-all technique to motivate all students. Instead, they must ask and answer the question, “What makes *this* student tick?”

“...Underachievers are, in fact, highly motivated—in directions other than getting good grades. And finding out precisely where their motivation lies is the key to helping them turn around and become achievers at school.”
(Mandel & Marcus, 1995, p. 3)

Albert Einstein, the great mathematician and physicist, has been labeled by various sources as an underachiever. Einstein himself admitted that language was difficult for him and he struggled to learn the French

and English languages. At the age of 16, he failed the entrance exam to an electrical engineering program at Zurich Polytechnic, probably due to his inability to read the questions accurately in French. Einstein knew his strengths and his shortcomings, writing that he wished to become a teacher because of his “disposition for abstract and mathematical thought” in light of his “lack of imagination and practical ability.” Two years later, Einstein was accepted into the school, but was unable to find a permanent teaching position. It was during his employment at a patent office that he penned his Theory of Relativity, and the rest is history (O’Connor & Robertson, n.d.).

Motivation largely depends upon our needs, expectations, and incentives—factors that are mostly learned (MacDonald, 2005). Since these learned factors determine what we do and how far we get in life, it’s safe to say that motivation can be taught.

Debunking the Underachievement Myths

Some students come bounding through the doors of their school ready to learn, while others enter reluctantly and spend a good deal of their energy avoiding work. The discrepancy between ability and product can be found as early as elementary school when a youngster excels in reading during class but fails to complete assignments or makes sloppy mistakes on the comprehension test. In middle school, underachievement emerges in both academic and nonacademic areas, where behaviors range from withdrawal to defiance. By high school, the child has been labeled an underachiever and is likely denied access to honors classes and encouraged to take vocational classes. A situation such as this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Battle, 2002).

Before addressing successful classroom strategies that research shows motivate students to learn, let's look at some of the myths surrounding underachievement.

Myth—Effective Curriculum and Classroom Management Are Key to Motivating Students

Teachers place a lot of emphasis on setting up classroom guidelines that allow them to control the environment, believing that structured classroom management will motivate students to learn. But a quiet, well-organized classroom does not equate to good teaching, nor does control and compliance create a climate for academic attainment (Bartholomew, 2007).

Motivation does not spring forth from effective management, curriculum, and instruction. These factors are merely the starting point that provides the framework for creating motivating opportunities.

Myth—Some Students Are Just Not Capable of Learning

Unless a child is mentally disabled, research shows he or she is totally capable of achieving success. Unfortunately, many students adopt an attitude of defeatism. What students believe about how their brains work can have profound effects on their motivation and school achievement.

Students fall into two categories: those with a fixed mindset who believe intelligence is set and those with a growth mindset who believe intelligence can be realized through learning. Students with a fixed mindset are focused on how smart they appear to others and believe that hard work is an indication that ability is lacking. When these students experience a setback in school, they report feeling dumb and may entertain the possibility of cheating the next time around. Students with a growth mindset are interested in learning and believe hard work yields significant results. When these students experience a setback in school they take ownership for the outcome and report that they will study more or differently next time (Dweck, 2008).

According to Dweck (2008), a recent study followed several hundred students over a 2-year period—through 7th and 8th grade—to see if the mindsets of these two groups of students could be changed. The

control group of underachieving students received eight lessons worth of study skills. The other group received eight lessons in growth mindset. Those lessons began with an article called “You Can Grow Your Intelligence: New Research Shows the Brain Can Be Developed Like a Muscle” (available online through the Association of Independent Schools at <http://www.nais.org>). These students were reportedly mesmerized by the idea that the growth of their brains were in their hands.

After 8 weeks, the control group showed no improvement in math grades and their scores continued to decline. The growth mindset group showed a significant increase in their math grades and their scores continued to increase. The teachers who didn't know there were two different groups identified students from the growth mindset group as those showing significant improvement and possessing a motivation to learn.

“Many students had seen school as a place where they performed and were judged, but now they understood that they had an active role to play in the development of their minds.” (Dweck, 2008, p. 116)

The ultimate finding of this study is twofold:

1. Preconceived notions about how brains function can affect motivation and performance.
2. Mindsets can be changed.

Myth—Underachievers Respond Best to Rewards and/or Punishments

Frustrated teachers and parents alike often choose the wrong strategy to motivate underachieving students: they either promise rewards or impose punishments (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). Such strategies assume the child understands what is being asked of them and that they possess the knowledge and tools to complete the assignment appropriately. Students who consistently respond only to rewards have been trained to look to others for approval and validation—the simple carrot-and-the-stick model (Bartholomew,

2007). Reward systems can actually decrease motivation in the long run if students become overly reliant on rewards, thus inhibiting them from developing the ability to monitor or evaluate their own performance over time (Lavoie, 2007).

Punishment, on the other hand, is effective only as long as the threat of punishment exists. In other words, children will act appropriately as long as they are being watched. When the threat leaves the room or the substitute teacher arrives, the student will revert to his original behavior. This can be likened to an adult who speeds when no police officer is in sight. Another reason punishment is not an effective motivator is because children tend to associate the punishment with the punisher. A student is more likely to blame their teacher for punishing them rather than taking responsibility for the action that instigated the punishment. In the long-term, punishment does little to motivate students to do better (Lavoie, 2007).

Not all rewards should be considered worthless, however. Research shows that verbal rewards had positive effects on motivation if they were delivered in an informational rather than controlling manner and that tangible rewards could motivate if they were given occasionally and unexpectedly. They had negative effects when they were given merely for participation, without regard for the quality of performance (Good & Brophy, 2008).

"We conclude that the key to rewarding effectively is to do so in ways that support students' motivation to learn and avoid encouraging them to think that they engage in learning activities only to earn rewards." (Good & Brophy, 2008, p. 159)

Rewards are most effective for increasing effort rather than for improving the quality of performance. Therefore, it is better to offer rewards along with routine tasks when the child is clear about the goal or strategy to be used, or with tasks in which the speed of performance is more important than creativity. Students who are driven to do well for the sole purpose of gaining

some type of reward tend to meet the minimum standards required rather than striving for superior performance (Good & Brophy, 2008).

Myth—Underachievers Are Lazy and Cannot Be Motivated

The student who appears disinterested, fails to contribute to classroom discussions, and turns in shoddy homework may be labeled as lazy. This is not necessarily true. The student who puts his head down on his desk in the back of the room is highly motivated—he's motivated to keep silent and not participate! The correct interpretation of such an action would be to say that the student is not motivated to do what the teacher has asked him to do (Lavoie, 2007). Researchers Harvey Mandel and Sander Marcus have come to the conclusion that underachievers are, in fact, highly motivated—in directions other than getting good grades (1995).

Many students who are considered lazy are actually experiencing learned helplessness. We have all experienced learned helplessness in one area or another and, as adults, we accept it in each other. This is not always the case with children. Learned helplessness comes into play when we encounter a situation in which we have been unsuccessful in the past. For example, I am not the best downhill skier. The first time I went, I broke my thumb. The second time, I ended up on a black diamond hill and struggled to make my way down without killing myself. Now when friends ask if I want to go skiing, I tell them no—I'm not good at it. The fact is, I may be good at it if I applied myself and took some lessons. Instead, I don a learned helplessness attitude.

There are students who struggle in a particular subject and, as a result, withdraw during a lesson or demonstrate a reluctance to learn anything new because past experiences have revealed that they cannot be successful in this particular discipline. Such students assume that failure is inevitable and unavoidable (Lavoie, 2007). Some students avoid failure by lapsing into plagiarism and other forms of cheating (Bartholomew, 2007). These students do not have the luxury of getting away with a learned helplessness attitude. When they avoid assignments, the teacher will notice and take action. Persistent avoidance pushes the child further and further behind academically.

This is especially detrimental to students with learning disabilities, whose chronic failure and frustration leave them with feelings of helplessness and a reluctance to learn anything new (Lavoie, 2007).

Teachers can best address learned helplessness by taking three definitive steps:

1. Understand and embrace the nature of the learned helplessness. Why is the student avoiding the given assignment(s)?
2. Change the student's thought process so he or she no longer believes that failure is inevitable. This means considering both the actual failures and the child's perception of the reasons for his or her failure. Such students need to relearn that they are in charge of their progress.
3. Create a learning environment that is supportive and nonthreatening, where mistakes are viewed as inevitable and useful! Measureable successes need to be an integral part of the learning environment (Lavoie, 2007).

"Students are not motivated to learn in the face of failure." (Boekaerts, 2002, p. 10)

Myth—All Underachievers Are Motivated by Competition

Competition can add excitement to some classroom activities, but most motivational theorists oppose competition as a primary motivational strategy (Good & Brophy, 2008). While there are some kids who thrive in a competitive situation, most do not. Students who believe they have a chance of winning will do their best, while those who think they will lose are likely not to try (Lavoie, 2007). Remember the school spelling bee—only those students who were good spellers signed up to compete.

There are several good reasons why competition as a motivational strategy doesn't work:

1. Competition exposes students to public failure rather than private failure.
2. Students in competitive environments are so focused on "winning" they miss the objective of the lesson and fail to focus on what they are supposed to learn.

3. Where participation is mandatory, competition is more coercive than motivational.
4. Competition ensures there will be losers (Good & Brophy, 2008).

"When students compete among themselves for a fixed number of rewards, there are clear winners and losers. The result is that the goal of many students in a given classroom is to avoid failure, not attempt to succeed." (Dembo, 2004, p. 41)

Not all competition is bad. Some types of competition may prove beneficial in those situations where the stakes are not too high. For example, students who are asked to compete against themselves (i.e., try to beat their last grade) do not run the risk of embarrassment if compared to other students in the class. Or, if students are part of a competitive group effort (i.e., which class has the best return on homework assignments), they may be more likely to participate knowing their classmates are depending on them (Lavoie, 2007). Competition is most appropriate when used with routine tasks where every student has an equal chance of winning (Good & Brophy, 2008).



Close Up

1. Which of these "myths" do you find most surprising? Why?
2. Which myth do you think is most commonly perceived as true in your school?
3. Is there any change that you would make in your classroom now that you know the research and these myth-busters?

One Size Does Not Fit All

There is no panacea for underachievement because what motivates each student is unique. The reasons why students underperform are vast. But, attempts to

expose those reasons can help the teacher uncover the driving force behind individual underachievement and create lessons that will ensure learning takes place.

Meeting a Student's Physical Needs

Many students come to school hungry, stressed, and sick. According to the National Center on Family Homelessness (2009), 1 in 50 children experience homelessness each year. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2005) reports that homeless children are sick at twice the rate of other children and are twice as likely to go hungry. It's no wonder some students will not or cannot participate in class.

The basic needs of students must be met before true learning can take place. Get to know your students and their parents and the community in which they live. Which students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch? Which students are classified as homeless? Which of your students may not be having their basic needs met? Don't place serious restrictions on access to water or food. Allow your students to bring a water bottle into your classroom or to visit the water fountain as needed. Keep crackers in your desk, and if a child appears to be fading, offer him a couple and ask him to get back to work (Lavoie, 2007). Don't limit bathroom breaks or call attention to a student's restroom visitations. Some children will attempt to use a bathroom break to avoid work, but teachers need to make it clear that students will be held accountable for the information they missed (Lavoie, 2007). Showing care can go a long way toward motivating your students.

Some students are just not capable of sitting for very long. While some students may be able to comfortably sit in the same position for hours on end, other students may find 20 minutes to be intolerable. Give your students the option to "stand and shake" or to stand for an entire lesson, provided they are paying attention and not distracting other students (Lavoie, 2007). If a student wants to sit on the floor to complete an assignment, allow her to do so. Above all, do not deprive any student who has physical needs from participating in recess. More than anyone else, students who feel cramped in a classroom or behind a desk need the space provided during recess (Lavoie, 2007).

Addressing a Student's Emotional Needs

Students who are underachieving in the classroom resist doing the work for a variety of reasons. The first step is to identify the type of underachiever and then address the motivation behind the negative behavior.

The Underachieving Coaster

One of the most common types of underachievers is the coaster. This is the student who does just enough to get by without working too hard or consistently. The telltale signs of this pattern emerge toward the end of elementary school when students fail to carry through on projects that require planning and discipline (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). This type of underachievement was first referred to as the Non-Achievement Syndrome (NAS) by psychologists Dr. Robert Roth and Dr. H. Arnold Meyersburg in 1963.

The underachieving coasters are the world's ultimate procrastinators, and they are impervious to adult efforts to get them to do better. They give up and they get low marks. Coasters have a ton of plausible excuses for their poor academic performance. They operate on the premise that if they don't try hard and fail, they can always say they might have done well had they tried. This strategy appears to protect their self-worth (Dembo, 2004).

Research has identified four situations that can have an effect on coasters: (1) a test is about to be given, (2) a project due date has arrived, (3) report cards are being sent home, and (4) the parents are about to meet with the teacher. In each instance, a deadline has appeared on the horizon (Mandel & Marcus, 1995).

Coasters strive to avoid responsibility and avoid confrontation at all costs. So, the first step to motivating this type of student is to make a date to meet with the child's parents. At this meeting, provide the parents with the class syllabus, project deadlines and requirements, and a complete understanding of your grading system. Together, come up with a system to monitor the child's work. Then meet with the student regularly to assess his progress—and don't accept excuses (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). Holding a student accountable is not an easy task, but periodic checking needs to be purposeful and consistent. Set up a structure and stick to it. Your actions will demonstrate

what it means to set a goal, create a plan to achieve that goal, and, finally, to reach that goal.

Bear in mind, coasters are manipulative, and they will *not* respond to rewards or punishments. Therefore, when meeting with a coaster, stick to the facts, focus on the student's strengths and achievements, and help the student set goals as an incentive, not a punishment. The ultimate objective is to get the student to begin to take responsibility and ownership for his actions.

The Anxious Underachiever

Another type of underachiever is the anxious underachiever. This is the student who fears failure and never thinks his or her work is good enough. Between 10% and 20% of underachievers fit the tense, uptight profile, and the parents of these students tend to be critical at home (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). The good news is that this type of student can be relatively easy to change because he or she is willing and eager to take direction. Anxious underachievers conform to the expectations of adults and need constant reassurance and approval from authority figures—not their peers. They look almost exclusively at the world through others' eyes rather than their own.

When an anxious underachiever fails to perform to his or her potential, it's because he or she can't stop worrying about getting it wrong. This type of student may look like a procrastinator when in fact he or she is a worrier. Sometimes this type of underachiever can make him- or herself sick with worry or anticipated embarrassment. Anxious underachievers are perfectionists and appear more mature than they are, perhaps dressing like an adult and taking on conservative airs. The perfectionist in them offers two choices: get it right or don't do it at all.

Because anxious underachievers lose sight of the big picture as they get bogged down in the unimportant details, the teacher must often remind them of the overall objective of each lesson. Anxious underachievers are always looking ahead, imagining the worst. Assist them in breaking assignments into manageable tasks with due dates, and then ranking them in terms of priority. Ask the student to verbalize his or her understanding of the assignment with a quick synopsis. Set a time limit for your anxious underachievers to stop whatever they're doing, whether they are done or not. This type of student will always want

to improve what they've done. Consequently, in their minds, a project is never finished or good enough. If the student asks you to check his or her work, review the assignment and then ask the student if he or she thinks they met the assignment's goal. Anxious underachievers are always looking for outside approval, so a goal of the teacher should be to help the student recognize his or her own achievements and instill a sense of independence (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). Remember, anxious underachievers need praise, so keep it brief and low-key. The last thing you want to do is praise the student so overtly that he or she continually strives to receive lavish praises with each assignment.

A certain amount of anxiety can be healthy, as it can keep us alert and motivate us toward a goal. But out-of-control tension can immobilize a child and render him or her helpless. In severe cases, students can sink into depression when their inner tension is fueled by a paralyzing sense of inadequacy (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). If you sense a student's anxiety is beyond your ability to manage, seek professional help from a psychologist, psychiatrist, or counselor.

The Identity-Searching Underachiever

A small group of underachievers can be classified as identity-searching underachievers. These students are involved in a struggle with themselves to figure out who they are, where they are going, how they're going to get there, and whether the effort will be worth it. The research is limited, but there are indications that this prototype appears in mid to late adolescence and, by the high school level, affects girls more often than boys (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). This prototype has all the markings of an early mid-life crisis.

Identity-searching underachievers may appear to be lazy when in fact they are drained by the energy it takes to search for their purpose. This type of underachiever is intensely self-absorbed and passionate about many causes. They have big dreams and grandiose plans; they may agonize over the environment and politics; and they experiment with opinions, beliefs, and values. But for all their talk, they rarely resolve anything.

When it comes to schoolwork, identity-searching underachievers may be highly motivated to succeed in some subjects, but not others. It depends on the value they give to a subject, not whether they enjoy it or

whether they are able to actually do the work. They are in a constant search to discover what is meaningful and to avoid what is meaningless (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). For example, if a student has decided that she is going to become a Red Cross nurse and work in a third-world country, she is not going to put a lot of effort into reading Shakespeare, which has nothing to do with her current goal. Of course, her goals could change next year.

The teacher's role should be to help this type of student realize that every subject is relevant to navigating in the real world. The problem is, the identity-searching underachiever doesn't really want anyone's advice or help. So, the best way to help is through listening—nonjudgmental, noncontrolling, empathetic listening. Use reflective statements, such as:

- “Tell me more about that.”
- “I wonder what this means.”
- “It sounds as if you are upset.”
- “You seem to be disappointed (or angry, uncomfortable, sad...)”
- “I get the impression that you're not sure what this means.” (Mandel & Marcus, 1995, p. 138)

Do not use questions. Questions beg an answer. Reflective statements, on the other hand, respect the other person's decision to respond or not—and the student may in fact choose not to respond. Listen with empathy, allowing the student to make his or her own decisions rather than forcing your agenda. Remember, this type of underachiever is constantly searching and trying out different identities, so expect contradictions and sudden changes in ideas. But when identity-searching underachievers immerse themselves in asking their own questions and generating their own answers, they can become intensely focused and motivated, almost overnight (Mandel & Marcus, 1995).

The Defiant Underachiever

The defiant underachiever turns everything into a power struggle. They lose their tempers easily and argue with authority. They will go as far as to give up something that is really important to them rather than let an adult “win.” They will deliberately do things that annoy others, and one of their favorite responses is “I don't know.” They can be spiteful and vindictive, blaming others for their actions.

Defiant underachievers want desperately to be independent, but they are not ready to step into the real world—and they know it! They are caught in the gap between childhood and adulthood, and, to them, it is painful (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). They unconsciously get caught in the unsubstantiated belief that freedom and independence are achieved by defying authority. Once they begin the pattern of rebelling at all costs, it is difficult to break them of the habit.

Underachieving in itself is an act of defiance for the defiant underachiever. They are not fighting for a principle or cause, nor are they searching for their identity. They are simply rebelling for the sake of rebelling. Teachers have to be careful about being lured into the power struggle. Avoid confrontations, which are exactly what the defiant underachiever wants. Outline your assignments, state the objectives, explain how students will be graded, and set your due date. When the defiant underachiever in the classroom says, “This is stupid,” reply by saying—in a nonconfrontational tone, “You're entitled to your opinion, but the assignment stands as stated. If you have any questions about how to proceed, you can talk to me after class.” Then go on with your lesson (Mandel & Marcus, 1995).

Do not take attacks on your lessons, classroom management, or assignments personally. The defiant underachiever's goal is to put you on the defensive. Your goal needs to be to maintain control within the classroom. When you see the defiant underachiever making healthy independent choices, acknowledge and praise him.

The Wheeler-Dealer Underachiever

Wheeler-dealer underachievers are impulsive, scattered, charming, disarming, and action-oriented. They lie, cheat, steal, damage property, and skip classes. When this student is in school, his main goal is to satisfy his immediate needs, even at the cost of classmates and friends. Long-range consequences aren't even a thought. Luckily, only a small number of students fit this description: less than 10% (Mandel & Marcus, 1995).

Wheeler-dealer underachievers attract other wheeler-dealer underachievers as friends, thus they normally travel in packs. This, if left unattended, can turn into bullying. Psychologists Harvey Mandel and Sander

Marcus believe students with this type of behavior problem frequently come from fractious families where each parent relates to the student separately (1995). Thus, the wheeler-dealer underachiever learns at an early age how to divide and conquer and how to defeat those who are in authority.

Wheeler-dealer underachievers are addicted to immediate gratification, which normal classroom settings do not provide. Helping this type of student change will take a team effort and may require professional assistance. Since wheeler-dealers thrive on secrecy and manipulation, it is important that all parties (teachers, principal, parents, and perhaps classmates) meet and stay in communication. The focus on getting a wheeler-dealer underachiever to change needs to be on helping him realize that his impulsive behaviors are self-destructive and that he needs to take responsibility for his actions. Change will occur—albeit, slowly—only if all parties are involved with holding the student accountable (Mandel & Marcus, 1995).

Imagine a glass of water that is half full or half empty...

- *The Coasting Underachiever will say, "No question about it. It's half full or half empty. I'll get back to it tomorrow."*
- *The Anxious Underachiever will say, "Would you like me to fill it up for you?"*
- *The Identity-Searching Underachiever will say, "I don't think I like the shape of the glass."*
- *The Defiant Underachiever will say, "I didn't order water!"*
- *The Wheeler-Dealer Underachiever will say, "How much do you want for the glass?" (Mandel & Marcus, 1995, p. 274)*



Close Up

1. *Identify one current or former student for each underachiever type described.*
2. *Identify one student that may struggle with physical needs that impair learning.*

How to Create a Motivating Classroom

Remembering that one size does not fit all, teachers may have to rummage through a number of motivational techniques to find the ones that speak specifically to each underachieving child. The process may be lengthy, but in the long run the student will learn and the teacher will be a better educator because of it. Overall, the techniques listed below are best practices that will prove beneficial in every classroom environment.

Four preconditions set the stage for successful employment of motivational strategies:

1. The classroom is a community that supports learning.
2. Activities are of appropriate difficulty.
3. Activities lead to worthwhile learning outcomes.
4. The teacher uses moderation and variation in motivational strategies (Good & Brophy, 2008).

Collaboration and Cooperative Learning Groups

Collaboration can be a strong motivator. Most preschool children are highly cooperative and extremely willing to help their fellow classmates. Competition, in contrast, is a learned behavior, where students learn to compare themselves to others (Lavoie, 2007). Some have argued that competition in the classroom prepares students for the real world. However, most employment situations are not competitive, but rather cooperative. Success in the workplace is contingent upon competence, cooperation, and motivation—not the ability to compete, unless you are in sales (Lavoie, 2007). Today's businesses are looking for employees with strong teamwork skills, not employees with a strong competitive nature (Walters, 2000).

Most adults who lose their jobs are dismissed due to a lack of motivation, poor interpersonal skills, incompetence, or cyclical economic forces. The oft-repeated warning to children that “when you grow up, you will lose your job if you can’t compete” is simply false. (Lavoie, 2007, p. 18)

Cooperative learning groups work best when the participating students are supportive of this type of instructional method. However, research (Hancock, 2004) shows that certain students may perform poorly in such settings due to a number of personality variables (e.g., shyness, anxiety, introversion, and so on). Teachers need to take note of those students who may not be operating in their preferred manner of learning when they assign them to a cooperative learning group. Provide them with steady encouragement in their endeavors. Peer-interactive activities will be most effective if they are worthwhile learning experiences in which every student has a substantive role to play in carrying out the group’s mission (Good & Brophy, 2008).

Meanwhile, students who thrive in group settings will be motivated to learn simply by being placed in cooperative learning groups where the success of the team is contingent upon group interdependence and individual accountability (Lavoie, 2007; Walters, 2000). Interdependence functions on the premise that each student’s success and progress is largely dependent on the performance of his or her learning partners. Accountability requires that each student completes his or her assigned tasks appropriately, which were thoughtfully tailored to each student’s strengths. Studies show that students who possessed a desire to work with their peers in cooperative learning groups were more motivated to learn than those students without a high peer orientation (Hancock, 2004).

Some of the most vocal skeptics of cooperative learning are those gifted students who worry that their grade will be adversely affected by the weakest link in the group. This concern can be obliterated by ensuring students that they will be evaluated individually.

Under no circumstances should all students within a group receive the same grade—students should be assessed individually to ensure that everyone is doing their part for the benefit of the group (Lavoie, 2007).

When cooperative learning groups are established correctly, the focus is on teamwork and collaboration and how well the team members work with each other. Collaborative learning activities promote positive social interaction where students share ideas, initiate discussions, teach each other, and learn tolerance, patience, acceptance, and generosity (Lavoie, 2007).

Use Clear Directives

It is important that every student know and understand the rules of the classroom. Schools have policies and classrooms should as well. A teacher should not ask anything of a student that he or she would not ask of him- or herself. Be explicit about what constitutes a desired behavior. Consistently monitor compliance with classroom rules and intervene to correct inappropriate behavior (Good & Brophy, 2008).

Time needs to be respected. Due dates should coincide with the grade dates. Don’t ask students to turn in work if you don’t expect to grade it within the next few days. Schedule regular times each day to review independent work and return completed papers promptly, with feedback (Good & Brophy, 2008). Be cognizant of the fact that some students may need more time to finish lengthy projects, dependent upon their ability to focus, their access to resources, and the support they get at home (Lavoie, 2007). American psychologist William Glasser said, “There are only two places in the world where time takes precedence over the job to be done. School and prison.” If time is the motivating factor, the student will never learn the content.

Give directions as concisely as possible. State the objectives, present clear information, and break the tasks down into step-by-step procedures (Good & Brophy, 2008). Before a lesson, before the start of a unit, before assigning a classroom activity or homework assignment, teachers should clearly state the objectives, goals, and expectations. Either write them down or have students write them down so that everyone is clear about what is required. This is especially beneficial for children with learning and language problems who have difficulty following instructions due to processing, sequencing, or memory deficits (Lavoie, 2007).

Feedback should be informative and specific. Vague comments or arbitrary grades do not assist the student in understanding what he or she did well. Feedback should include language students can use to describe their own performance (Good & Brophy, 2008). For example, comment on the accuracy, completeness, and understanding conveyed in a student's composition. Point out the composition's organization, its style, its vocabulary, and any interesting facts or sentence structures. Students will read such comments with interest and internalize what they are good at.

Some strategies for giving effective instructions include asking students to repeat or paraphrase the information with a fellow student, presenting instructions in numbered lists that can be checked off as each task is accomplished, activating prior knowledge by referring to a similar previous activity, and demonstrating procedures or providing an example of the finished product (Lavoie, 2007). Plan like a corporation by deciding which areas need the most focus and finding measurable ways to achieve those goals (Vuko, 2004).

Organizing Materials and Assignments

A disorganized student usually has good intentions. They bring their homework home—they may even do it! But somehow it gets lost in the shuffle and never makes it back to the teacher to be graded. Or

they complete the assignment incorrectly because the directions got skewed. Punishments for such behavior will only frustrate the disorganized child more (Peters, 2000).

As state and federal mandates have increased the demands regarding what children should know and be able to do at each grade level, teachers are forced to put more focus on covering content and meeting defined objectives. The downside is that students are no longer being taught the life skills they will need in college and beyond: how to organize, study, and cooperate. Because underachievers lack the skills to organize themselves, adults must take responsibility for teaching them organization and self-discipline (Parker, 1987/88).

Require your students to carry a daytimer or create your own daily assignment sheets. Teach your students how to fill them in, and check to make sure they are being used correctly. These sheets should include a line for each subject followed by a space where the assignment can be written and a column for the due dates. There should also be a box to indicate when nothing was assigned (Peters, 2000). If the student is young, you may want to ask for a parent's signature on each completed homework assignment. Don't forget to ask your students whether the organization system is working for them.

Effective Classroom Rules

1. Students are more likely to follow rules that they helped create.
2. Limit the number of rules to seven or less. List them in a sequence that follows the order of a typical school day.
3. Post rules so they are visible for all to see. Use positive statements that begin with an action verb, such as "Walk in the hallway" rather than "Do not run in the hallway."
4. All rules should be measurable, observable, reasonable, and enforceable. Students should be encouraged to enforce the rules too.
5. Rules should reflect effective study habits and reinforce the basic belief that students are in school to learn.
6. Rules should be somewhat flexible so they can be adapted to fit the abilities of each student if necessary.
7. Continually get feedback on rules throughout the year. Revise or eliminate as needed.

Adapted from Lavoie, 2007, pp. 74-75

For long-term projects, provide students with checklists so they have a step-by-step list to follow and to check off as work is completed. Once students understand how your checklists work, ask them to create their own. Of course, you should review these checklists until you are sure the student is learning how to break large assignments into smaller pieces.

Students also need to learn how to structure extensive content in order to be able to study it before a test. Teach them to note the main idea or objective, divide content into clusters or sequences, and take notes that support understanding (Good & Brophy, 2008). When a child learns good study skills and develops appropriate study habits, the bases for self-control and frustration tolerance are set (Peters, 2000).

Set Learning Goals

Goal theorists have shown that students who approach a lesson with a learning goal in mind are focused on acquiring the specific skill or knowledge the activity was designed to address. The student focused on learning goals is concerned with making progress and places value on the effort (Dembo, 2004; Good & Brophy, 2008). In contrast, students who approach a lesson with a performance goal in mind treat the activity like a test of their ability to perform rather than an opportunity to learn (Good & Brophy, 2008). In other words, the student is more concerned with how he or she compares to other students or, even worse, how he or she can best outperform other students (Dembo, 2004).

To prepare students to learn efficiently, introduce activities by stating the learning goals and the benefits that will result from engaging in the accompanying tasks. Then guide students in establishing their own long-term and short-term goals that will help them focus on what they need in order to achieve (Bartholomew, 2007). Encourage students to work with partners who can help them write their goals, gauge their progress, and provide feedback on their efforts.

"Allowing students to set goals is probably the most effective means of having them begin to take charge of their learning." (Bartholomew, 2007)

Learning goals should be meaningful (i.e., worth learning) and challenging (i.e., not too hard or too easy), reachable (i.e., attempted in the here and now) and specific (e.g., complete a page of math problems with only one error). In the case of long-term projects, teachers should establish proximal goals for each activity so students can attain small successes along the way (Good & Brophy, 2008).

In order for learning goals to be effective, teachers cannot incorporate harsh grading systems or competition. The focus needs to be on individual student growth, not grading on a curve or comparing students' achievement. In such an atmosphere, students will not feel comfortable taking intellectual risks and working through assignments to reach a deeper level of understanding (Good & Brophy, 2008).

Capitalize on Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation functions on the theory that students learn best when they have a choice in what they are learning and find the material interesting. Ideally, students should be able to choose what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. Unfortunately, schools cannot be managed like recreational centers, and prescribed curriculum does not leave room for choice in the typical classroom setting.

Intrinsic motivation can best be applied in the classroom by teachers helping students identify their long-term goals and building lessons to reach those goals. Insofar as curricular requirements allow, teachers can provide their students with opportunities to exercise autonomy and make personal choices about their education (Good & Brophy, 2008). What does this look like?

When beginning a new unit, determine what your students already know and where they are deficient. This could be achieved through pre-unit quizzes, group brainstorming, or pair-share sessions. The pre-unit quiz not only helps students discover what they don't know, it helps the teacher discover what students do know! And there is no reason to teach students what they already know.

Discuss with your class what else they would like to learn about a topic in addition to the points revealed during the pre-unit quiz. Also identify the skills they

hope to possess by the end of the unit. Set objectives for the class and post them for everyone to see. Brainstorm ways in which your students can demonstrate their learning over time, and allow them to choose their form of assessment. Choice is especially important for older students who have a stronger need for autonomy and control (Good & Brophy, 2008). Studies show that providing choices usually stimulates intrinsic motivation and can enhance learning; however, too many choices can be counterproductive (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). Narrow the options to less than 10. With each subsequent class, address the gaps made evident in the pre-quiz and give your students time to research missing knowledge. Throughout the process, monitor and guide students to reach the class objectives.

"Students can generate self-determined reasons for learning when prompted. You can induce them to generate their own motivation to learn by asking them to think about topics or activities in relation to their own interests and preconceptions." (Good & Brophy, 2008, p. 172)

Where research and project-based lessons or units do not lend themselves to supporting the curriculum, look for subject matter that is of interest to your students and can be used to carry an objective (Good & Brophy, 2008). For example, when presenting the concept of latitude and longitude, identify the current location of sunken ships (e.g., Titanic or Bismarck) to motivate understanding. For homework, brainstorm with your class historical landmarks or places of interest. Then have your students select five and determine their location through latitude and longitude.

Conferencing and Coaching One-on-One

Meeting with students one-on-one is a proactive measure to prevent problems from occurring. These meetings should take place regularly and provide the teacher with opportunities to support, praise, and motivate (Lavoie, 2007). Communication is a two-part process, so teachers have to employ effective listening skills, as well as speaking skills, in the exchange.

The conference can be subject matter specific or classroom management specific. Whatever the focus, follow these guidelines as you conference:

- Set an agenda for the conference and let the student know beforehand what will be discussed. Stay on track.
- Encourage the student to ask questions. Conclude the session by asking the student if there is anything he would like to ask.
- Don't hesitate to be redundant. Repeat or rephrase main points of the conference and summarize what was discussed. Remember to ask the student if your summary is in line with his (adapted from Lavoie, 2007, p. 89).

Approach students in the classroom as a coach does on the football field. The purpose is not to see how well a student retains or regurgitates information once it has been disseminated, but rather to respond to the weaknesses in a child's performance to help him or her improve overall skills. A good coach knows his or her players' strengths, weaknesses, personality, and potential and caters to each of these areas to help the child become the best he or she can be (Lavoie, 2007). A classroom teacher should do no less.

Focus on Mastery

Structure your activities as learning experiences rather than tests. Highly qualified teachers will judge the success of a class not by how well students learned but by how well students were taught. The ultimate goal for any teacher should be to help students master the objectives and skills of the subject being taught. The focus should be on mastery, not evaluation. If a student doesn't understand the lesson, re-teach it in a way that is more compatible with the child's learning style. "Difficulties in learning usually occur not because students lack ability or do not make an effort but because they lack experience with the type of task involved" (Good & Brophy, 2008, p. 154).

Focusing on mastery learning may require creative lesson structure in order to allow slower students more time to master a skill before moving on to the next objective. It is a constant cycle of teaching, testing, re-teaching, and re-testing in order to assess individual student's knowledge. Those students who have "mastered" the objective would either move on to the

next unit or work on enrichment activities while the teacher provides additional instruction to those students who have not “mastered” the objective (Good & Brophy, 2008).

Mastery learning can best be accomplished through differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction lets the teacher adjust several classroom elements to accommodate different abilities without sacrificing the lesson objectives (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008).

The first element is content, which refers to what students need to learn and how they will acquire the information. Examples of differentiated content include:

1. Reading materials at varying levels of difficulty.
2. Required readings accessible by audio tape.
3. Spelling or vocabulary lists geared to the student’s readability level.
4. Small group instruction targeting the group’s needs.

The second element is process, which refers to the learning activities the students will be engaged in. Examples of differentiated process include:

1. Tiered activities with different levels of complexity or support.
2. Interest-based learning centers that allow students to explore topics of interest to them.
3. Manipulatives or other hands-on supports.
4. Additional time to complete a task.

The third element is product, which refers to the culmination of the lessons that asks the student to apply and present what they have learned. Examples of differentiated products include:

1. Options for presenting lessons learned.
2. Rubrics that match or extend students’ skill levels.
3. Allowing students to create their own evidence of skills.

The fourth element is the learning environment, which refers to how the classroom works and feels. Examples of differentiated learning environments include:

1. Providing quiet spaces and collaborative spaces.
2. Providing materials to fit a variety of learning styles and cultures.
3. Developing routines that provide support when the teacher is not immediately available (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008).

“Studies of teachers working with heterogeneous classes suggest certain general principals. First, as the range of student ability increases, whole-class teaching will need to decrease and individual assignments and small-group work will need to increase.” (Good & Brophy, 2008, p. 231)

Treat Each Student Equally

Though perhaps unintentionally, teachers seem to treat low-achieving students differently from students who are more academically competent (Lavoie, 2007). University researchers Thomas Good and Jere Brophy (2008) have observed that low-achieving students receive less praise and less feedback, and teachers interrupt them more often, provide them with less response time, and seat them in distant locales in the classroom. Unaware of their behavior, teachers can actually contribute to a student’s chronic failure and underachievement.

If low-achievers perceive that their teachers are just going through the motions with them, offering them an impoverished curriculum, they will begin to withdraw or act out, turn in incomplete work or none at all, or adopt an air of apathy or disdain for school (Good & Brophy, 2008). Since it is the teacher who controls the cultural climate of the classroom, it is ultimately the teacher who has the ability to motivate or stifle his or her students. A first step for every teacher is to create a classroom that is safe—where each student feels secure and is encouraged to share. Any hierarchal structures that exist within the school or community should be dismissed in the classroom in order to create an inclusive environment where all students feel recognized and valued (Lavoie, 2007). The classroom culture should strive to embrace differences as a fundamental aspect of society.

Set the mood. Teachers should use techniques such as the following as part of their daily routine to model how students should treat each other within the classroom:

- Greet each student by name at the door of the classroom. Use the student's preferred nickname.
- Use attentive listening with each and every student, during both formal and informal conversations. Look the student in the eye and do not allow distractions to interfere.
- Allow students to work at their own rate; circulate the room in a nonthreatening manner.
- Use their names when writing comments on their assignments. Always write a comment! A grade alone is not enough.
- Show an interest in your student's personal life. Attend outside activities your students may be involved in, such as plays or sports. Inquire about a student's health after an absence. Wish your students a happy birthday! (Lavoie, 2007, p. 60)

Active Learning

Many teachers think “learning” and “fun” are mutually exclusive, but they don't have to be. A little creativity can make drills and memorization tasks more enjoyable (Lavoie, 2007). Many students consider lessons to be fun when interaction is involved—with the teacher, other students, or materials. If your normal mode of delivery is lecture, consider expanding your repertoire through computerized learning activities, simulation exercises, research projects, dramatic readings, or realistic problem-solving opportunities (Perry, Turner, & Meyer, 2006).

Certain objectives lend themselves well to game-like application activities where ordinary assignments become “test-yourself” challenges. For example, math challenges could involve finding shortcuts for tedious mathematic procedures (Good & Brophy, 2008). Literary assignments could hold hidden information that emerges as the activity is completed, kind of like a puzzle. Other challenges ask the student to “find the problem” by identifying the goal. This can be applied to a number of subjects. For example, provide your students with the answers to a 10-point quiz, and ask them to provide the questions. These game-like activities are more effective in motivating students to learn than competitive games (Good & Brophy, 2008).

“Even within traditional lesson formats, you can stimulate your students to discuss or debate issues and offer opinions about cause-and-effect relationships. Students need to learn basic facts, concepts, and definitions, but a steady diet of lower-level content soon becomes boring.” (Good & Brophy, 2008, pp 165)

Appropriate Praise

Praise can motivate, but it can also harm. It all depends on how it is used. The key to its effectiveness is quality, not frequency (Good & Brophy, 2008). Effective praise draws attention to individual progress and mastery, and it promotes students' intrinsic motivation to learn. Ineffective praise is basically everything else.

Every time a teacher praises a student, he or she shapes the student's opinion of him- or herself, his or her motivation, and his or her achievement (Black, 2000). When used incorrectly, praise molds a child's dependency on outside forces for their own sense of self-worth. For example, when a teacher praises a student for doing what is expected, he or she conveys to the student that they might have made the wrong choice otherwise (Black, 2000).

It's all too common to hear teachers and parents telling a child that he or she is smart, but praising children for their intelligence rather than their efforts can send them the wrong message. Several studies show that children who were praised for their intelligence lost confidence in their abilities and became unmotivated as soon as the assigned tasks became more difficult. In contrast, children who were praised for their efforts showed an increase in motivation and performance (Dweck, 2008).

Modeling Motivation

As educators, teachers should be involved in a constant state of learning along with their students. Teachers do their students a great service by modeling their own curiosity and the satisfaction that comes with learning.

Modeling is more than demonstrating. Demonstrating means to show a student how to work through the steps of a process in order to achieve the correct answer. Modeling means working through the steps by sharing your thoughts. This helps students to see how educated people think, act, solve problems, and respond to everyday life experiences (Good & Brophy, 2008).

Consider the following scenario between an elementary school teacher and his or her fifth-graders:

Teacher: Last night I was reading a magazine article about the Vikings. Does anyone know anything about the Vikings?

Student 1: Yeah! I know they were fearless warriors who invaded other lands and stole all their gold and stuff.

Student 2: I know they came from Norway.

Teacher: (pulling down the world map) They did come from Norway (pointing to the map)—and Sweden and Denmark. They did visit other lands, but they didn't always invade. Sometimes they just traded. When I read that, I thought, "Who did they possibly trade with?" Does anyone want to take a guess?

Student 3: I think with each other.

Teacher: This article I read said that the Norsemen—that's what they were called—traded with people as far away as France (pointing to the map) and Turkey and even China!

This dialogue models several things during instruction. First, the teacher models self-motivated learning after hours. Second, the teacher models his or her curiosity. Third, the teacher models a true interest in what he or she has learned. Curiosity and interest can be modeled as a response to students' questions and answers by

1. asking them to make predictions;
2. raising questions that the learning activity will enable them to answer; and,
3. revealing that their existing knowledge is not sufficient to accomplish the stated objective or is inconsistent with new information (Malone & Lepper, 1987).

Praise your students' participation in such discussions, and treat them as if they were already eager learners. Model patience and persistence in seeking solutions, and point out the benefits of working through mistakes (Good & Brophy, 2008).

Present assignments with enthusiasm, depicting it as interesting and important. The more interested you appear to be, the more interested students will likely become.

"When a topic is familiar, students may think they already know all about it and thus may read the material with little attention or thought. You can counter by pointing out unexpected, incongruous, or paradoxical aspects of the content; call attention to unusual or exotic elements; noting exceptions to general rules, or challenging students to solve the 'mystery' that underlies a paradox." (Good & Brophy, 2008, p.172)



Close Up

1. Share your classroom behavior rules. If all the teachers in your school used the same, simple classroom behavior rules, how might it help students? Substitutes? Administrators? Parents? New Teachers?
2. Of the 10 suggestions for creating a motivating classroom listed in this section, which two do you use most often? Which two are most difficult for you?

Learning Styles and the Underachiever

Some students learn best visually, others aurally. Some students need both sight and sound to maximize retention of new information. Then there are students

who need hands-on experience—who learn by doing. Some students learn best in groups while others learn best working on their own. There are students who can concentrate in the most chaotic of environments, and there are others who can only concentrate in absolute silence.

While it is useful to know your student's preferences, it is not feasible to try and accommodate each student's learning style within your lessons. The information, however, can prove helpful if adopted loosely and used primarily as a reminder to include a variety of learning activities in your curriculum (Good & Brophy, 2008). After all, certain learning goals will only be attained through specific activities that do not lend themselves to various learning styles. The key point is that effective students are attuned to their learning style and use it to their advantage to promote learning. Underachievers, on the other hand, may not know what would work best for them and so fail to develop their learning style (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). This is where the teacher's knowledge of learning styles can best be utilized.

Imagine you are back in high school. You have a history teacher who likes to lecture, but you learn best visually. You listen during class, and write down as much as you can. But after class you approach the teacher to ask what book he would recommend that you read that would reinforce what was covered in class. You tell the teacher that you took notes, but it is hard for you to grasp so much information when it is shared orally. This move will help you get the information you need and probably got you some brownie points with the teacher.

Now imagine that you are another student in the same class, except you don't know your learning style. All you know is that the teacher talks a lot and will probably expect you to remember everything he just said. You tried to take notes, but you struggle with writing the correct information. And what exactly are you expected to remember? Perhaps you were writing down the unimportant stuff. Finally you say to yourself, "What does it matter anyway? I am not going to pass this class. It's too hard."

Labeling and the Underachiever

Learning Disabilities

As intelligence testing became popular, educators began to identify underachievers whose grades were lower than what their IQ predicted. Some of these students simply weren't applying themselves, while others seemed to be working hard but making slow progress. Efforts to better understand the latter group's struggles led to the development of special education as we know it today and a plethora of labels for identifying learning disabilities (Good & Brophy, 2008).

Children with learning disabilities are capable of learning given the right tools to support their weakness. Underachievement can be the result of an undiagnosed learning disability, or it can occur in spite of the diagnosed learning disability, or it can evolve because of the learning disability. When a student sincerely struggles with completing assignments due to a known or unknown learning disability, issues of low self-esteem can surface that contribute to underachievement. Yes, there are students with learning disabilities who have excellent self-esteem but still underachieve.

Attention Deficit Disorder

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) can contribute to a child's underachievement by impeding his or her ability to concentrate fully on the lesson being taught. Some ADHD and ADD children are impulsive while others are inattentive. The impulsive student has trouble waiting his or her turn, interrupts at inopportune times, and tends to be fidgety, while the inattentive student doesn't seem to be listening, loses things, and is easily distracted (Peters, 2000).

There are three main approaches to treating children with ADHD or ADD: medication, behavioral treatments, and cognitive-behavioral treatments. While some parents will take steps to have their child diagnosed and, perhaps, medicated, others will choose to either ignore the symptoms or forego medication. This does not relieve the teacher of his or her duty to educate this student.

Behavioral treatments require the teacher to state clear goals, provide specific examples of what is acceptable and what is not, and identify the consequences associated with noncompliance. Cognitive-behavioral treatments train students in skills that help them focus, settle into a task, remain aware of the goal, budget their time, and respond appropriately (Good & Brophy, 2008).

The most important thing for teachers to remember is that just because a hyperactive student displays normal attention and self-regulation for certain periods of time does not mean he or she can do it all the time. Though the disruptions can be exasperating, do not blame the child for your feelings. Hyperactive students report feeling misunderstood and rejected by teachers and peers, as well as constantly being criticized for doing things they were not aware they were doing (Weiss & Hechtman, 1986, in Good & Brophy, 2008). Help students recognize their disruptions in order to begin taking charge of their own learning.

Gifted Students

Most gifted children possess highly developed verbal or mathematical skills, but this doesn't mean they are immune to underachievement. For example, some gifted children begin a task without much attention to the details. They get the big picture, analyze it, and devise theories to explain the complexity of it all (think Einstein), but they lack the ability to complete the assignment, which requires actual work on the individual tasks (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). Gifted students are often brighter than they are mature. They may underachieve because they already get the big picture and don't see the point of doing the menial tasks to prove their understanding.

Some gifted students underachieve because they have never been identified as gifted. As a result, they are easily bored in class because they are not challenged by what their teachers ask them to do. Though gifted students can be found in all demographic groups, linguistically diverse students are particularly underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009).

- White students represent approximately 56% of the total U.S. school population, and 8% were identified as gifted in 2006.

- Asian students represent approximately 4.1% of the total U.S. school population, and 13.1% were identified as gifted in 2006.
- Hispanic students represent approximately 21% of the total U.S. school population, yet in 2006, only 4.2% were identified as gifted.
- Black students represent approximately 15% of the total U.S. school population, yet in 2006, only 3.6% were identified as gifted.

Teacher referral is often the starting point of entry into gifted and talented programs. Research shows, however, that linguistically diverse students are not referred for services as often as White or Asian students due to a number of factors. These include bias against certain groups, lower expectations of achievement, unfamiliarity with the unique characteristics of giftedness in other cultures, and failure to consider how life circumstances affect behaviors in school (Learning Point Associates, 2008).

Additional research has found that many gifted underachievers have been passed over due to a lack in academic skills needed to achieve (Mandel & Marcus, 1995). These include self-discipline, study skills, and organizational abilities.

"Schools designed for average-achieving students that do not provide for the gifted, learning disabled, or mildly retarded child foster feelings of inferiority and contribute to underachievement." (Parker, 1987/88, p. 34)

Teachers and school administrators can best serve gifted underachievers by evaluating current practices for identifying all gifted students to ensure screening practices are nondiscriminatory and culturally sensitive (Learning Point Associates, 2008).

Summary

It is an unfortunate reality that every classroom will have at least one unmotivated underachiever, probably more. Since there is not a remedy for underachievement as a whole, teachers need to learn to

accept each child for who he or she is but refuse to accept underachievement as an acceptable approach to learning. The first step to identifying the root cause for underachievement is to look for the personal thing that makes the student tick—this is the connection between desire and educational achievement.

A number of strategies that can be categorized as best teaching practices for all can also help prepare the underachieving student to be successful; for example:

- Help students organize their time and materials so they are better able to concentrate on the business of learning.
- Employ cooperative learning groups that are contingent upon group interdependence and individual accountability.
- Set specific learning goals—not performance goals—for your students; and have students create their own learning goals with a focus on mastery.
- Provide students with choices in what they will learn and how they will demonstrate their understanding.
- Expect the same amount of effort from each student, not the same performance. Do not compromise your expectations because of students' attitudes, cultures, or socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Praise specific accomplishments.
- Model motivation.

"The longer a child underachieves, the more baggage she will accumulate—that is, the more deficient in work habits, self-discipline, and study skills she will become." (Mandel & Marcus, 1995, p. 267)

Finally, people are not born with a specific talent or an aptitude for a certain subject—it must be nurtured. The brain is a constantly changing muscle that can be cultivated. When students are challenged, make mistakes and learn from them, and apply the newly found information to future lessons, they take control of their learning and, in essence, motivate themselves.



Close Up

1. Share three ways that you as a teacher provide for the different learning styles of your students.
2. Review the 7 strategies listed in the Summary. Which strategies do you think are most important for a first-year teacher?

References

- Bartholomew, B. (2007). Why we can't always get what we want. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 88(8), 593-598.
- Battle, J. S. (2002). *Motivating the underachiever—How to motivate teenagers, students*. Retrieved from <http://www.about-underachieving-teens.com/motivate-underachievers.html>
- Black, S. (2000). The praise problem. *American School Board Journal*, 187(8), 38-40.
- Boekaerts, M. (2002). *Motivation to learn*. Brussels, Belgium: International Academy of Education.
- Brophy, J. (1981, Spring). Teacher praise: A functional analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 5-32.
- Dembo, M. H. (2004). Don't lose sight of the student. *Principal Leadership*, 4(8), 37-42.
- Dweck, C. S. (2008). Brainology: Transforming students' motivation to learn. *Independent School*, 110-119.
- Flowerday, T. & Schraw, G. (2000). Teacher beliefs about instructional choice: A phenomenological study. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92, 634-645.
- Good, T. L. & Brophy, J. E. (2008). *Looking in classrooms*. Columbus, OH: Allyn & Bacon/Merrill Education.
- Hancock, D. (2004). Cooperative learning and peer orientation effects on motivation and achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research*, (97)3, 159-166.
- Lavoie, R. (2007). *The motivation breakthrough: 6 secrets to turning on the tuned-out child*. New York: Touchstone.
- Learning Point Associates. (2008). *Gifted and talented students at risk for underachievement* [Issue Brief]. Washington, DC: Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement.
- MacDonald, B. (2005, January/February) The principal's role in student motivation. *Today's School: Shared Leadership in Education*, 21-25.

- Malone, T. W. & Lepper, M. R. (1987). Making learning fun: A taxonomy of intrinsic motivation for learning. In R.E Snow & M.J. Farr (Eds.), *Aptitude, learning, and instruction. Volume 3: Conative, and affective process analyses* (pp. 223-253). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Mandel, H. P. & Marcus, S. I. (1995). *“Could do better”: Why children underachieve and what to do about it*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *Racial/ethnic enrollment in public schools*, [Indicator 7]. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2009/section1/indicator07.asp#info>
- National Center on Family Homelessness. (2009). *America’s youngest outcasts: State report card on child homelessness*. Retrieved from www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/pdf/rc_full_report.pdf.
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2005). *Facts on trauma and homeless children*. Retrieved from http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/promising_practices/Facts_on_Trauma_and_Homeless_Children.pdf
- O’Connor, J. J., & Robertson, E. F. (n.d.). *Albert Einstein*. Retrieved from <http://www.engineering.com/Library/ArticlesPage/tabid/85/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/2/Albert-Einstein.aspx>
- Parker, M. G. (1987/88, December/January). Tips for motivating the under-achieving student. *Adventist Education*, 50(2), 10-12, 33-34.
- Perry, N. Turner, J., & Meyer, D. (2006). Classrooms as contexts for motivating learning. In P. Alexander & P. Winne (Eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology* (2nd ed.) (pp. 327-348). Mahwah, NY: Erlbaum.
- Peters, R. (2000). *Overcoming underachieving*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Tomlinson, C. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C., Brimijoin, K., & Narvaez, L. (2008). *The differentiated schools: Making revolutionary changes in teaching and learning*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Vuko, E. P. (2004). *Teacher says*. New York, NY: The Berkley Publishing Group.
- Walters, L. S. (2000). Putting cooperative learning to the test. *Harvard Education Letter*, 16(3). Retrieved from <http://www.leadandlearn.com/files/file/articles/CoopLearning.pdf>

Visit www.EdReadySearch.org for more information on motivating underachievers.



Get Trusted and Targeted Research & Information

www.EdReadySearch.org



ERS

Educational Research Service

ERS subscribers receive FREE or discounted access to materials from ERS on www.EdReadySearch.org. In addition, now you can find ReadySearches™—prepared searches from all the best sources.

Register today, and see how www.EdReadySearch.org can work for you!

Books in Brief

The following books provide information on motivating underachievers.

***Motivation for Achievement: Possibilities for Teaching and Learning*, by M. Kay Alderman** (360 pages, 2007, \$48.95 from Routledge c/o Taylor & Francis, Inc., 7625 Empire Drive, Florence, KY 41042. Phone: 800-634-7064. Fax: 800-248-4724. Web site: <http://www.routledge-ny.com/books>)

Written specifically for teachers, this book translates theoretical principles on motivation into practical ideas and suggestions for the classroom. The text focuses on the roles teachers play in supporting and cultivating motivation, both in terms of establishing classroom structure and instruction, and in helping students develop tools that will enable them to be self-regulated learners.

***Looking in Classrooms (10th Edition)*, by Thomas L. Good and Jere E. Brophy** (528 pages, 2008, \$118.00 from Allyn & Bacon/Merrill Education, 445 Hutchinson Ave., Columbus, Ohio 43235. Web site: <http://www.allynbaconmerrill.com/>)

This book presents state-of-the-art research on student motivation, classroom instruction and student learning, classroom management, and adapting instruction to meet the needs of individual learners. The information is practical and relevant, allowing for easy transfer of information from text to classroom practice. The book also provides useful information about how to use quantitative and qualitative observational techniques for describing and improving instruction.

***Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, by Carol Dweck** (288 pages, 2006, \$26.00 from Ballantine Books/Random House, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. Phone: 212-782-9000. Web site: <http://www.randomhouse.com>)

Stanford University professor and psychologist Carol Dweck proposes that a person's mindset has everything to do with their level of motivation and ultimate achievement. A person with a fixed mindset believes talents and intelligence are fixed. A person with a growth mindset believes talents and intelligence are fluid. More information about the Mindset psychology can be found at <http://mindsetonline.com>.

***Empowering Underachievers: New Strategies to Guide Kids (8-18) to Personal Excellence*, by Peter A. Spevak and Maryanne Karinch** (287 pages, 2006, \$10.85 from New Horizon Press, P.O. Box 669, Far Hills, NJ 07931. Phone: 800-533-7978. Available from Amazon.com)

This book helps to define the various types of underachievers and the motivational techniques that work with each type. Emotional development plays a key role in student motivation. Problem-solving examples help the reader identify emotional situations that prevent certain students from moving ahead in an academic setting.

***How the Brain Learns (3rd Edition)*, by David A. Sousa** (328 pages, 2006, \$40.95 from Corwin Press, 2590 Conejo Spectrum Drive, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320. Phone: 800-233-9936. Fax: 800-417-2466. Web site: <http://www.corwin.com>)

David Sousa's straightforward explanation of how the brain learns turns theory into classroom practice. This book helps educators move beyond the traditional mode of instruction and apply the latest brain research to lessons that will help motivate students to take charge of their learning. It is an indispensable tool for educators who want to understand how students process and retain information.

Web Resources

The following Web sites contain information about motivating underachievers.

<http://www.brainology.us/>

The **Brainology** program is the brainchild of Stanford University professor and psychologist Carol Dweck. The program for growth mindset learning focuses on helping middle and high school students strengthen their brains to adopt learning-oriented behaviors. This site has all the information you'll need to motivate your students to take charge of their learning.

<http://www.kidsource.com>

A process called attribution retraining is described at **kidsource.com**. The goal is to help students

(1) concentrate on the immediate task rather than the risk of failure, (2) respond to frustration by learning from mistakes, and (3) take responsibility for failure rather than blaming it on a lack of ability.

<http://www.mcmel.org>

The **Maine Center for Meaningful Engaged Learning (MCMEL)** is dedicated to helping students learn and achieve through nine motivating strategies: positive relationships, constructive feedback, active work, attention to learning styles, personal interests, avoiding rewards, giving students voice and choice, higher order thinking, and real world connections.

<http://www.appliedmotivation.com>

The **Center for Applied Motivation** promotes the idea that achievement and motivation are dependent upon attitude and personality, which are internal forces. Therefore, external strategies to motivate do not provide long-term change. The site contains a number of resources and articles aimed at discovering what drives certain students to underachieve and what educators can do about it.

Related ERS Resources

Order the following resources by phone, fax, mail, email, or through the ERS Online Catalog at www.ers.org.

ERS Focus On... What Special Education Research Tells Us about Teaching Underachieving Students (FO-#0719)

This *Focus On* describes instructional strategies that are effective for students with disabilities and that have also been shown to be effective in raising the achievement outcomes of underachieving students without identified disabilities. 2008. 23 pages. Available in packages of 15 for \$90.00 (ERS subscriber discounts available).

ERS Focus On... Differentiating Instruction to Help All Students Meet Standards, Second Edition (FO-#0772)

To paraphrase a quote by Thomas Jefferson, "there is nothing so unfair as the equal treatment of unequal children." Teachers cannot use a one-size-fits-all model of instruction to successfully reach all children. This *ERS Focus On*—an update of our popular 2004 edition—is designed to help teachers assess and improve their own

instruction by focusing on the skills educators need to meet the challenge of differentiating instruction effectively. Accountability, high-stakes testing, and increasing diversity present teachers with greater challenges than ever before. This *Focus On* will encourage the discussion and understanding needed to meet the challenge of differentiating instruction effectively. 2009. 21 pages. Available in packages of 15 for \$90.00 (ERS subscriber discounts available).

Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement, 3rd Edition (FO-#0538)

This book is an essential tool for school leaders and practitioners alike, and is the single most authoritative source for effective K-12 teaching and learning practices across the content areas. This one volume brings together in readable, concise language the authoritative research on effective classroom practices in all major disciplines currently taught in elementary and secondary schools: the arts, foreign language, health, language arts, physical education, mathematics, social studies, and science, as well as generic practices that apply across all disciplines. This third edition includes over 100 research-based classroom strategies, and features a new chapter that synthesizes the research on high-performing school districts, and discusses ways school districts can support instructional improvement. 2004. 258 pages. \$40.00 (ERS subscriber discounts available).



EDUCATIONAL
RESEARCH SERVICE
www.ers.org

1001 N. Fairfax St., Suite 500, Alexandria, VA 22314-1587

Tel: 800-791-9308 • Fax: 800-791-9309

Email: ers@ers.org • Web site: www.ers.org

