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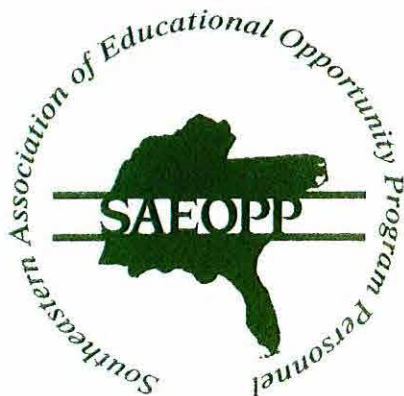
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CONTENTS

Editorial Board	3
Board Members	5
From the Editor	7

MONOGRAPH SERIES

Monograph 1

Characteristics and Theories of the Overachiever.....	9
--	----------

Monograph 2

Incentive Motivation Psychology: An Exploration of Corrective Learning Behavior	33
--	-----------

Monograph 3

Accelerated Learning and Short-Term Instructional Programs: Sustaining Interest and Intrapersonal Growth	57
---	-----------

Book Review	87
--------------------------	-----------

GAO Abstracts	91
----------------------------	-----------

Abstract Reviews	101
-------------------------------	------------

Guidelines for Authors	105
-------------------------------------	------------

Membership Information.....	108
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Characteristics and Theories of the Overachiever

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Introduction

The major difficulty in identifying overachievers is that they do not come from any particular type of socioeconomic background, nor do they represent, as previously thought, the gifted or talented learner (Daniels, 1984; Hyland, 1989; Whitmore & Maker, 1985; Wolf & Gygi, 1981). Instead, overachievers emerge from diverse background settings and their productive output is not necessarily superior to that of other learners (Brehm & Self, 1989), only intuitively better than previously expected by teachers, counselors, and supervisors. The overachiever seems to come from a set of circumstances that, collectively, result in greater productivity than would otherwise be expected. If an overachiever is defined as a learner whose productive output exceeds expectations, then three possible explanations may be posited.

The first explanation might be that overachievement is the result of underestimation and poor evaluation (DePaulo, 1988; Lerner, 1985; Parish, 1990; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1986) rather than the result of an improvement in learner outcomes. Is the overachiever a learner who requires special motivation that may or may not be included in traditional, criterion-based evaluations? Do the overachievers exceed expectations because they master cognitive skills which teachers did not anticipate (Schneider, Hanne, & Lehmann, 1989)? Obviously it becomes very difficult to determine whether an overachiever more nearly exemplifies a limited learning disabled (LD) student or simply a disinterested learner (Green, 1988; Horowitz, 1988; Landrum, 1989; Lerner, 1985; Swanson & Cooney, 1989). Jeff Horowitz (1988), for example, strongly suggests that the latter case is true—students are often too disinterested or disgusted to perform at their best levels. Kitchens (1991) believes the problem rests with teachers who use teaching methods that do not match

student learning styles. She blames poor instruction for the high frustration levels that average high school students have for advanced math courses. In either case, an overachiever can be identified in terms of how much the learner exceeds teacher expectations provided of course that the teacher objectively measures student improvement. Possible methods for improving teacher objectivity include use of standardized test instruments, identification number scoring instead of traditional grading, or collaborative peer evaluation. Similarly, proper diagnostic distinction between limited learning disabled (LD) and unmotivated students may alleviate some of the problems associated with accurate learner evaluation. For example, an undiagnosed LD student's performance may be confused with underachiever traits. Whatever the case, teachers must ensure proper evaluation measures to identify potential LD, overachiever, gifted underachiever, and normal students.

A second explanation for learner output beyond original expectations may be that the overachiever is an inspired learner who because of the effects of one stimulus or another demonstrates strong will power and determination. Research suggests that certain types of individuals overcome unlikely obstacles because they somehow become sufficiently motivated (Bradley, Caldwell, & Rock, 1988; Brehm & Self, 1989; Graham & Harris, 1989; Schunk, 1987; Shelley-McIntyre & Lapidus, 1989; Zimmerman, 1989). Often, this motivation redirects an overachiever's previous disinterest in such activities as learning, work, hobbies, and sports, toward something more direct, personal, and substantial. Bordieri (1988) and Helmreich, Spence, & Pred (1988) note the phenomenon of personal motivation upon students. Schroth (1987) contends that there is a strong correlation between achievement motivation and task performance. Mitchell (1992) reported a pattern in the appropriate use of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and improved student self-efficacy. The degree to which students complete a task is directly related to their desire and motivation to perform the task, whether for intrinsic, self-efficacious reasons or for extrinsic, material ends. The overachiever surpasses low expectations in order to achieve some kind of personal benefit (Bradley, et al., 1988; Finch, 1988; Kofta & Sedek, 1989; Morrow & Sorell, 1989; Plescia-Pikus, 1988). The benefit will usually take the form of personal efficacy through which the overachiever is stimulated to overachieve by psychological associations between a higher level of

performance and an anticipated extrinsic desire (Bordieri, 1988; Schroth, 1987; Van Calster, Lens, & Nuttin, 1987; Zimmerman, 1989) or an intrinsic desire to succeed and to redefine rewards (Harackiewicz, Abrahms, & Wageman, 1987). Teachers', counselors', and supervisors' high expectations become a powerful incentive for overachievers. Despite any educational label, if the student finds some kind of motivation to perform, whether intrinsic or self-actualizing, productivity increases and output exceeds expectations (Baumgardner & Levy, 1988; Graham & Harris, 1989; Helmreich, et al., 1988; Mitchell, 1992; Phillips, 1987; Pyszczynski, Holt, & Greenberg, 1987; Scapinello, 1989; Schroth, 1987). Moreover, particularly in an educational setting, overachievers may develop the motivation to overachieve in response to misperceived low expectations, self-gratification from the overachievement, and personal goals that require an output higher than previously generated.

A third explanation for overachievement may relate to students' motivation in which cognitive skills are attained—albeit later in life than usual—and then put into practice. Research suggests that students learn at different rates and that student productivity hinges upon both a desire to achieve more and upon skill mastery itself (Graham & Barker, 1990; Graham & Harris, 1989; Harackiewicz, Abrahms, & Wageman, 1987; Renick & Hunter, 1989). Maturation is therefore one factor that may affect overachievement. Maturity is an important factor in the process of learning. How well adolescents cope with conflicting emotions—childhood traits of play, lack of seriousness, and developed cognitive skills—affects when and how much they can learn. Some studies, for example, have considered gender motivations; girls mature faster than boys and are motivated more easily and earlier (Boggiano & Barrett, 1992; Boggiano, Main, & Katz, 1991). Not only do immature students lack the cognitive skills they need to comprehend more complex concepts, but they also may be hindered by the influence of childish behaviors. As students age, their interests and goals shift. Some of them recognize the necessity for making hard choices and of having to perform better than they previously have. Overachievers in this group understand the importance of learning, its connection to future employment or college, and the practical utility of skill mastery upon their own lives. Younger students, in primary or even middle school, do not necessarily recognize the consequences of lowered output which results in lower performance

and possibly lower teacher expectations (Finch, 1988; Marjoribanks, 1989; Parish, 1990; Schunk, 1987). However, some overachievers may begin to perform better simply because they master requisite skills and, in effect, make some gains toward catching up with other students (Haynes, 1988; Phillips, 1987; Zimmerman, 1989).

There is an underlying assumption for some that most overachievers represent poor-achieving students who somehow develop competencies and improve their learning performance, but this is not typically the case. With regard to talented or gifted learners, who are also sometimes regarded as overachievers, their cognitive productivity may be superior to that of less able students, but their accomplishments may very well represent *underachievement* with respect to their own unique and advanced abilities (Heinzen, Teevan, & Britt, 1988; Plescia-Pikus, 1988; Scapinello, 1989). There is a pattern between overachievers and their early achievement in primary school. Overachievers typically perform poorly at the normative level because they do not recognize the connection between school performance and their own lives. Soon after puberty boys and girls begin to draw social distinctions in terms of their socioeconomic status, their roles in the world, and their caste within the school (Boggiano & Barrett, 1992; Boggiano, et al., 1991; Scapinello, 1989; Sleeper & Nigro, 1987; Swanson & Cooney, 1989; Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989). If an overachiever's personal self-assessment does not match the assessment of others, especially by teachers, peers, and parents, then the overachiever must either assimilate into the caste imposed by others (DePaulo, 1988; Kofta & Sedek, 1989; Schneider, et al., 1989) or exceed the expectations of others through academic overachievement (Brehm & Self, 1989; Feldman & Ruble, 1988).

In contrast, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that low-achieving students become overachievers because the same factors that result in increased productivity among overachievers, namely self-efficacy and motivation are typically not present (Hyland, 1989; Morrow & Sorell, 1989; Scapinello, 1989). As Morrow and Sorell (1989) state with regard to sexually-abused female adolescents, the damage to necessary learning behaviors is already done. Intense peer pressures that are clearly present in secondary schools for students to conform to arbitrary caste placement may result either in *conformity* (Kofta & Sedek, 1989; Schunk,

1987; Sleeper & Nigro, 1987) or *overachievement* (Harackiewicz, et al., 1987; Haynes, 1988; Helmreich, et al., 1988; Hyland, 1989). The pressure to conform can result in overachievement for those students who enter a caste that expects a higher output level (Feldman & Ruble, 1988). For the many others, though, the intrinsic desire to improve caste placement is the motivation to work harder and to overachieve.

Statement of the Problem

The status of overachievers has never been seriously researched independently of other studies, namely as separate from research of gifted learners. Taken in this context, overachievers' accomplishments are lost in a classification that defines the results or end-product, but not the process. Gifted learners characteristically possess high cognitive abilities and are productive due to their skills and high motivation to learn. Overachievers, however, are distinct from gifted learners in that overachievers exceed teacher expectations and possess strong motivations to succeed based on intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, personal motivation to change, maturation, and/or self-efficacy. In the absence of a means to distinguish overachievers from other groups, overachievers will either remain unidentified or confused with other groups of students; and some overachieving students may never reach their maximum potential in the absence of necessary incentive programs and motivations.

Review of Related Literature

In principle, there is no concrete scholarly analysis of overachievers as a separate, distinct group in and of themselves. What is available focuses more on the study of underachievers, gifted learners, or at-risk students. For example, much of the literature emphasizes intrinsic or extrinsic motivational psychologies (Biernat, 1989; Bordieri, 1988; Brehm & Self, 1989; Brewer, Dunn, & Olszewski, 1988; Brewer, Hollingsworth, & Campbell, 1995; DePaulo, 1988; Foster, 1986; Graham & Barker, 1990; Graham & Harris, 1989; Harackiewicz, et al., 1987; Haynes, 1988; Helmreich, et al., 1988; Morrow & Sorell, 1989; Piedmont, 1988; Pyszczynski, et al., 1987; Scapinello, 1989; Schneider, et al., 1989; Schroth, 1987; Van Calster, et al., 1987).

A central difficulty is the identification of overachievers. It may be tempting to view gifted students as overachievers simply because they perform at a higher level than other students, sometimes surpassing even teacher expectations. This, at least, is the suggestion made by Foster (1986) in *Giftedness: The Mistaken Metaphor* and by Van Calster, Lens, and Nuttin (1987) in *Affective Attitude Toward the Personal Future: Impact on Motivation in High School Boys*. So-called gifted students may represent cases of mislabeling based upon subjective teacher evaluation or misinterpretation (Harackiewicz, et al., 1987; Parish, 1990). Indeed, Pyszczynski, et al. (1987) discuss the negative outcomes of "expectancies" for students who face, by implication, low expectations from others. However, by definition, the performance of gifted students is directed by superior abilities. Swanson and Cooney (1989), for example, suggest that the strong relationship between intelligence and student ability is, in part, a result of gifted-type students who are more motivated to achieve, a point confirmed by normative studies on gifted students (Bordieri, 1988; Bradley, et al., 1988; Haynes, 1988; Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989; Whitmore & Maker, 1985). Consequently, there is rarely a problem related to low expectations for the brightest students. This suggests perhaps a methodology for distinguishing gifted and overachiever students based upon consistency of performance. Yet, sometimes even the gifted student, in the absence of any kind of incentive or motivation to learn, fails to do so (Foster, 1986; Haynes, 1988; Heinzen, et al., 1988; Hyland, 1989; Landrum, 1989; Phillips, 1987; Scapinello, 1989; Sleeper & Nigro, 1987; Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989). The overachiever, however, fairly consistently exceeds output expectations.

The same may hold true for gifted learning disabled students who paradoxically possess astonishing talents in some areas and grave weaknesses in others (Graham & Harris, 1989; Parish, 1990; Renick & Hunter, 1989). These students typically perform well in mathematics and science, or in the social sciences, but not so well in other areas. However, these students perform according to their natural gifts and are not properly defined as overachievers because they do not exceed teacher expectations. The distinction is that the gifted learning disabled student performs well because they have the talent to do so, whereas the overachiever performs well because of internal drive, self-efficacy, and self-motivation.

The opposite problem exists with so-called special education students. Lacking the expectation of high skill outcomes, special education students rarely perform well (Bordieri, 1988; Kofta & Sedek, 1989; Scapinello, 1989; Schneider, et al., 1989), except in their own environment (Claus, 1990). When such students exceed teacher expectations, they become overachievers. Further, special education students traditionally reflect the worst elements in a school, having already been labeled or stigmatized as “underachievers”. Although special education can play a vital role in a student’s development, many school systems misuse it as a dumping ground for low achievers and behavior-problem students (Baumgardner & Levy, 1988; Bordieri, 1988; Bradley, et al., 1988; Claus, 1990; Feldman & Ruble, 1988; Graham & Harris, 1989; Haynes, 1988; Kofta & Sedek, 1989; Landrum, 1989; Schroth, 1987). And yet, why do some students succeed despite the odds that come with being in special education or with being labeled as learning disabled or unmotivated? Although scholarly attention surrounds overachiever theories of development, the research remains divided among three groups—environmental studies, latent exceptionality, and psychosocial influences.

Environmental Studies

The first category of research represents what may be termed *environmental studies* largely because the researchers believe that the key to effective learning rests primarily in analyzing, evaluating and improving the learning environment for students (Bradley, et al., 1988; Gottfried, Gottfried, & Fleming, 1994; Schroth, 1987; Sleeper & Nigro, 1987). Horowitz (1988) contends that learning disabled students feel “frustrated, angry, and defeated” (p. 639) by the time they reach adolescence. The best way for overachievers to resolve their problems is to instill how the cognitive output is ultimately a utility for themselves, not just for the teacher. Students “. . . find [their] own reason for wanting to come to school,” largely by breaking down preconceived notions about teachers and learning (p. 638). Horowitz represents a wider group that advocates improving the physical and emotional environment of the classroom and the school itself, through restructuring and desensitization techniques (Feldman & Ruble, 1988; Landrum, 1989; Parish, 1990; Scapinello, 1989; Schroth, 1987).

Green (1988) extends Horowitz's point by suggesting that we should involve exterior emotional factors, namely parents, who possess "... a unique perspective not readily apparent to the classroom teacher" (p. 91). However, Green's optimistic viewpoint fails to consider possible problems that stem from parents and life at home. Research tends to support that poor family structure causes learning dysfunction in children in the first place (Bradley, et al., 1988; Finch, 1988; Hutchinson, Valutis, Brown, & White, 1989; Kofta & Sedek, 1989; Morrow & Sorell, 1989; Plescia-Pikus, 1988). For example, factors such as *alcoholism* (Finch, 1988; Shelley-McIntyre & Lapidus, 1989); *poverty* (Claus, 1990; Renick & Hunter, 1989; Schneider, Hanne, & Lehmann, 1989); *sexual abuse* (Hutchinson, et al., 1989; Morrow & Sorell, 1989); *poorly developed self-actualization* (Baumgardner & Levy, 1988; Feldman & Ruble, 1988; Graham & Harris, 1989; Marjoribanks, 1989; Pyszczynski, et al. 1987; Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989); and *institutionalization* (Feldman & Ruble, 1988; Finch, 1988; Hutchinson, et al., 1989) create the conditions that result in learner apathy and low teacher expectations. Although Green's initial suggestion is a good one, it does not consider the deeply rooted problems such students may face and must, consequently, overcome. Those who can, then, are overachievers by definition.

Latent Exceptionality

There is a general assumption that certain students are actually perfectly capable, but because they are unmotivated they either fail or refuse to perform at expected skill outcome levels (Claus, 1990; Graham & Barker, 1990; Hyland, 1989; Kofta & Sedek, 1989; Parish, 1990; Renick & Hunter, 1989). As a consequence, teacher expectations for them frequently become lower but inaccurately so. Frequently, these students are willingly *tracked* into an educational system that separates them from other students and that stigmatizes them as second-class learners. To this extent such students may often be prevented from performing well simply because they do not wish to or because they lack encouragement (Haynes, 1988, Schroth, 1987; Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989).

However, some students will undergo a dramatic shift in their productivity and increase their output significantly, not only exceeding

teacher expectations but exceeding their own normal level of performance. According to Helmreich, et al. (1988) and Mikulincer (1989), students may undergo a socio-emotional epiphany from which they are more motivated to work and more willing to learn. When this occurs, *latent exceptional* students become overachievers. Piedmont (1988) discusses the phenomenon of achievement motivation with respect to the desires (and fears) of success. Causes for a sudden surge in productivity may vary, but all are connected to self-efficacy, maturation and, to a greater extent, motivational factors, either intrinsic or extrinsic.

Psychosocial Influences

Other researchers suggest that underachievement is either the direct result of, or more likely a symptom of, depression. Pryczynski, et al. (1987) contend that depression mixed with poor self-image contributes to decreased classroom productivity. Others point to how the grouping of like students with similar psychosocial difficulties perpetuates the problem (Baumgardner & Levy, 1988; Mukulincer, 1989; Phillips, 1987; Sleeper & Nigro, 1987; Van Calster, et al., 1987). For adolescents, it is difficult to overcome emotional handicaps resulting from a poor family life, or from peer pressures that are the driving, motivational force behind much of what occurs in school. Students must often concurrently face such problems as puberty, alcoholism, drug abuse, divorce, physical and sexual abuse, mental instability, and/or poor support services. The task of the overachiever then is to find ways to overcome these problems, whether by somehow putting them in perspective or by prioritizing goals (Chance, 1992). Whatever the case, how students cope with the dilemmas of depression and poor self-image may well provide the focal point from which to understand sudden changes and improved productivity.

Noting the difficulties of assertive and submissive behavior in male adolescents, LoPresto and Deluty (1988) discuss how each can perpetuate underachievement. Basic characteristics of assertive male students rest primarily with how strongly they identify work performed in school with their own future success and self-image. As long as improved productivity is associated with future goals and objectives, these students are overachievers in the sense that their work output exceeds teacher

expectations of them. However, if these male students represent tracked underachievers, motivation will be more difficult because the students typically encounter activities that either are not challenging or provide little incentive for improving productivity. Students tracked into special academic programs serving underachievers may face pressures from peers who push them to conform to a certain level of productivity. Non-conformers risk exclusion from the peer group (Boggiano & Barrett, 1992; LoPresto & Deluty, 1988; Schneider, et al., 1989; Swanson & Cooney, 1989).

An obvious question to ask is how one resolves the psychosocial problems that result from depression and similar problems. Piedmont (1988) argues that achievement motivation which tackles the fear of success, and consequently failure, is one solution (Biernat, 1989). Most other researchers believe that, as Graham and Harris (1989) argues, improving the environment and desensitizing the stress of learning are steps in the right direction. It is from this point of view that some students perhaps overcome their learning dysfunction and become overachievers. Certainly, considerable research suggests that the solution to psychosocial problems that affect classroom performance is to overcome them (Baumgardner & Levy, 1988; Bradley, Caldwell, & Rock, 1988; Claus, 1990; Finch, 1988; Hyland, 1989; Kofta & Sedek, 1989; Piedmont, 1988; Shelley-McIntyre & Lapidus, 1989; Van Calster, et al., 1987).

Statement of the Hypothesis

Although considerable research is available on the gifted learner, very little attention is devoted to the overachiever. This monograph seeks to address the problem by providing four theoretical profiles that identify and define the overachiever. Because of the diversity among overachievers, who come from variable backgrounds, the authors will provide a methodology to assist others in research that could help turn potential overachievers into overachievers.

Discussion of the Problem

As a consequence of the research for this monograph, four theoretical profiles are provided to help identify potential overachievers and

to suggest possible methods for fostering the desire to exceed expected productivity. In principle, these theories provide a profile that helps distinguish overachievers from other students.

Theory I: The Overachiever as a Limited Learning Disabled Student

Research consistently demonstrates that few students are balanced learners who are able to master skills equally well in all areas (DePaulo, 1988; Haynes, 1988; Helmreich, et al., 1988; Phillips, 1987; Scarpinello, 1989; Schneider, et al., 1989; Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989). Many students are advanced in some areas, but, in varying degrees, slower in others. In fact, some students are even gifted in one or more fields but are limited learning disabled in other fields. For the limited learning disabled student, again, overcoming the learning disability and exceeding performance expectations distinguish an overachiever from the typical learning disabled.

The limited learning disabled (LD) student is characteristically slow in some courses in school, but not in all. The problem is not so severe that the student is completely clinically labeled LD. Usually, LD students can be found in remedial math or resource English classes. Depending on whether the problem is mechanical (in which students have difficulty analyzing abstract functions) or verbal (in which students have difficulty communicating ideas to others), it is important to note that such students possess academic strengths in other areas which is why they are defined as limited LD students.

Overachievers frequently come from this group, largely because limited learning disabled students face peculiar frustrations among a more diverse set of peers than do gifted, normal, or typical LD students. On the one hand, limited learning disabled overachievers must confront the peer pressures and jeers of students in their more advanced classes who may mock them for being in stigmatized courses. On the other hand, they may face similar pressures from other LD students who may resent, be jealous of, or mistrust a limited learning disabled overachiever in their midst. As a consequence, many limited learning disabled overachievers are especially productive, because of their intrinsic motivation to leave LD courses in order to remain with a single peer group

(Haynes, 1988; Pyszczynski, et al., 1987; Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989). In this sense, limited learning disabled overachievers are characteristically hard workers who can be distinguished from underachieving limited learning disabled students by their productivity and demonstrable deeper respect for, and dedication to, their quality of work.

Theory II: Overachiever as Incentive Respondent

Motivational research has long demonstrated the influence of incentives on underachievers who, for whatever reason, fail to attain skill mastery (Biernat, 1989; Harackiewicz, et al., 1987; Helmreich, et al., 1988; Vallerand, et al., 1992, 1993). However, the influence of incentives can, to a great degree, cause some students not only to perform requisite classroom skills adequately but to become productive learners as well. The central benefit to an incentive program is that the reward often induces the necessary motivational desire to perform and to complete expected student outcomes.

To a great extent, most students who come from this group are overachievers because they exceed teacher expectations in their output. However, a distinction can be drawn between overachievers who are productive *in spite* of extrinsic rewards (Chance, 1992; Mitchell, 1992), and those who are productive *because of* the extrinsic rewards. Overachievers characteristically work hard in most if not all of their courses, as opposed to “bribed” students who produce only to gain a reward. Nonetheless, the extrinsic reward may serve as a catalyst to motivate overachievers to work harder and hopefully find intrinsic motivation in their own productivity.

Theory III: Overachiever as Respondent to Familial Breakdown

As we have seen, one of the prevailing characteristics in poor student performance is the systematic breakdown of the traditional family, resulting from problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, divorce, single-parent families, and sexual abuse. In the absence of a fostering, caring home environment, many students have difficulty coping with their dysfunctional home life in the context of problems inherent with the requisite conformity that teachers and peers impose at school. These

factors are largely environmental and share the same characteristic: the lack of intrinsic or extrinsic incentives to change poor productivity at school. Without proper motivation, these students have little chance of improving their output.

Yet, some students who fit this pattern seem to develop an awareness of what the consequences of inaction will be; and it is this group that emerges as overachievers. The research of Helmreich, et al. (1988) and of Kofta and Sedek (1989) points out the effects of repeated failures and their relevance to this type of student. Hyland (1989) describes the problem as more a case of *success-avoiding behavior*, a tendency to want to fail in order to avoid the responsibility that comes from positive productivity.

There are identifiable elements specifically associated with this type of student. For some, the promise of escape from problems at home and a chance for normalcy is strong. These overachievers seek extrinsic rewards (Schroth, 1987). For others, peer pressure to perform better (Mikulincer, 1989; Phillips, 1987; Sleeper & Nigro, 1987) or self-efficacy results in improved student performance (Brehm & Self, 1989; Brewer, et al., 1988; Feldman & Ruble, 1988; Plescia-Pikus, 1988; Van Calster, et al., 1987).

Theory IV: Overachiever as An Anomaly

The final theoretical profile is that the overachiever represents little more than an anomaly, a rogue student whose work exceeds teacher expectations for varied reasons unrelated to other students. Their success in the classroom cannot be replicated by other students because all are the product of a complex matrix of circumstances and reasons that may or may not fit a pattern for the so-called overachiever students. The identification of overachievers in terms of learning behavior is reduced to little more than a subcategory of some other group.

The problem with this position is that it does not take into account that, collectively, overachievers share certain common bonds with respect to productivity, that differ from those of occasionally overproductive students. First, overachievers develop behavioral patterns beyond simple intrinsic and extrinsic motives for overachieving. Their excessive workoholic habits persist and extend to most, if not all, levels

of their academic endeavors. When an overachiever begins to improve the quality and quantity of work produced, this becomes a behavioral pattern that is repeated. Brehm and Self (1989) note the peculiarity of motivational intensity among students who are driven to succeed.

Second, overachievers usually possess a keen awareness of themselves and their place in the world. They tend to overachieve in order to escape from personal hardships or to achieve high goals and personal standards of excellence. Hyland (1989) observes and discusses the anomalous characteristic of success-avoiding behavior which overachievers overcome. Also, as Van Calster, et al. (1987) contend, overachievers' concern for the future is what drives them to work harder, in order to achieve their goals and attain some degree of success.

In Table 1, an analysis is provided for the different theoretical profiles of potential overachiever learners with a short list of characteristics and general teacher responses to help identify and encourage potential overachievers. Basically, two teacher remedies emerge for all four kinds of students. First, mediate the presenting problem which is impeding progress. Secondly, appeal to the utilitarian desires of students.

Despite the amount of research that touches the overachiever as a phenomenon among different levels of learning, the lack of research in the specific field of overachiever behavior is disheartening. It is difficult to pigeonhole overachievers because they possess such diverse personalities, and are difficult to analyze in terms of an underlying pattern that would distinguish them from other students. It is this diversity and the many variables involved that contribute to the often frustrating problem of tracking and analyzing overachieving students, who all seem to come from diverse groups.

Synthesis

In Table 2, distinctions are drawn between the three types of students—underachiever, normal achiever, and overachiever. It is important to note the range in which *normal* students are identified. Normal refers to any student who performs at an expected level of performance. Such students may include (a) gifted learners who, identified as gifted, perform according to teacher and/or standardized test expectations; (b) resource students who, in the absence of skills to perform at higher af-

Table 1
Overachiever Comparison Chart

Kinds of Students	Characteristics	Remedies for Teachers
Limited Learning Disabled	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Strong in 1 of 3 discipline areas (mechanical, verbal, & logical) •Pulled by 2 or more divergent groups of peers •Psychosocial learner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Extrinsic opportunities such as rewards and opportunities to motivate •Mediating peer conflicts between LD and normal or gifted-learners
Incentive Respondent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Unmotivated learner, does minimum or less school work; a plodder •Latent-exceptionality or, sometimes environmental learner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Provide extrinsic and intrinsic rewards to acknowledge and praise student output •Associate learning to utilitarian desires of the student
Family Disintegration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Problems and conflicts at home, broken or single-parent home •Anti-social behavior, minimalist learner •Psychosocial & environmental learner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mediate family problems: education as alternative outlet or escape •Provide intrinsic rewards for learner output
Anomaly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Variable behavior: unmotivated, tracked into a low-achievement level •May be gifted, LD, or normal student •Usually latent-exceptionality learner •Shows promise in outside indicators (ACT, SAT, & achievement tests) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Provide extrinsic & intrinsic rewards to motivate students •Relate learning directly to utilitarian ends of student •Individualize student learning around more advanced or more challenging skills

fective and cognitive levels, fulfill similar productivity expectations; and (c) average intelligence students who similarly perform according to teacher expectations. It is important to draw these distinctions in order to avoid confusion and possible misidentification of gifted students or resource students as overachievers by definition. Provided their productivity meets expectations, they are not overachievers. If students consistently exceed expectations, then they become definitional overachievers.

Table 2
Overachiever, Normal Student Achiever,
and Underachiever by Characteristics

Type of Student	Typical Characteristics
Overachiever	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work output exceeds expectations • Highly motivated to succeed insofar as learning assignments conform to overachievers utilitarian ends • Overcompensation in areas where overachiever is weak (includes self-efficacy) • Responds better to extrinsic rewards than intrinsic • Comes from one or more of the following backgrounds: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Poor socio-economic 2. Family disintegration 3. Latent exceptionality 4. Anomalous (variable affective factors)
Normal Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-paced learner, moves at or even below his capabilities (this can include gifted students, if they do only what is asked of them in more advanced course work) • Balance of extra-curricular activities and school work • Jack-of-all-trades-type student: good in some areas, moderate or weak in others • Mild disinterest in areas of weakness • Stronger social orientation
Underachiever	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work output is consistently below expectations • Little or no attention paid to homework or academic studies • Has stronger social orientation or else is antisocial • May include gifted learners whose output is below what they are capable of (exclusive of teacher expectations) • Chief characteristic is non- or low-productivity

An overachiever is distinguished from a limited learning disabled (LD) student in their attitude toward the poor performance. Research draws distinctions between non-achieving students and those who refuse to accept limitations (Helmreich, et al., 1988; Scapinello, 1989). The key factor is intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that help some limited LD students exceed expectations. For some students, the relationship

between academic success and self-efficacy factors explain their overachievement (Haynes, 1988; Heinzen, et al., 1988; Phillips, 1987; Schunk, 1987; Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1989). Some kind of motivational system makes the work relevant and completion of it useful to the overachiever who performs it. Such students represent the largest number of overachievers; however, the motivation for success is typically geared more toward a psychosocial incentive.

Other types of overachievers, such as the incentive respondent, anomalous, and familial respondent overachiever are stimulated to produce as a response to family and personal problems, viewing education as a means of escape or as a solution to problems at home. These students are often very highly motivated and produce among the best work of all groups.

Finally, there is the anomalous overachiever, a student who does not fit into the traditional population of overachievers. These students do not exceed their output for identifiable motivational reasons. The drive is there, but the means to discern the motivation is not.

In a discussion of overachievers the recurring pattern seems to rest with incentives. Although the kind of incentives that affect overachievers vary, the results of overachievers' output seem to demonstrate the veracity of this relationship, which obviously warrants further investigation.

Implications for Educators

The implications of any study of the overachiever rest almost exclusively with the positive effects that such an analysis offers to learning behavior modification. If, for example, we can identify the background and characteristics of the overachiever, then it may be possible to develop, design, and implement an instructional model that, potentially, could bring out those qualities and turn underachievers into overachievers. In the case of the first theory, which suggests that overachievers may well be unmotivated learners, we can see an immediate, practical application for the analysis of how unmotivated students become productive learners.

Considerable research points out that environmental factors play a significant role in whether students participate in classes (Bradley, Caldwell, & Rock, 1988; Harackiewicz, et al., 1987; Gottfried, et al.,

1994; Heinzen, et al., 1988; Horowitz, 1988; Morrow & Sorell, 1989; Phillips, 1987; Schroth, 1987; Van Calster, et al., 1987). However, despite adverse factors some students (i.e., overachievers) overcome their problems to the degree that they not only master classroom skills but also survive in a much broader, wider scale in school. The obvious questions, of course, are how and why?

How do some students overcome personal problems and learning liabilities to succeed in school? The answers are varied, yet certain characteristics seem to emerge among those students who do succeed. First, at some point, overachievers shift their attitudes toward the purpose of education, usually as a means to an end, as an alternative solution to other problems (Biernat, 1989; DePaulo, 1988; Feldman & Ruble, 1988; Green, 1988; Helmreich, et al., 1988; Kofta & Sedek, 1989; Mikulincer, 1989; Plescia-Pikus, 1988). Although classroom performance may not necessarily become outstanding, overachievers' productivity improves.

Second, much research suggests that learning is a skill-based process that has a domino effect (Baumgardner & Levy, 1988; Biernat, 1989; Chance, 1992; Hyland, 1989; Mitchell, 1992). As students master key learning skills progressively, they tend to have fewer problems with higher level, more difficult skills and consequently become more productive in their classroom work. For the underachiever or limited learning disabled (LD) student, classroom success spawns more positive attitudes toward learning and becomes an incentive to learn.

Third, the influence of incentive-based learning bears an important role in the development of cognitive skills. As we have seen, motivational incentives whether emotional, economic, or intrinsic, create an atmosphere that encourages skill mastery. Again, the impact of incentives is not so much upon the reward motivation itself as it is upon the effect on the underachiever (Bordieri, 1988; Harackiewicz, et al., 1987; Piedmont, 1988). Improved student performance likewise results in more positive views toward learning and self-esteem that are so important to inducing greater productivity (Baumgardner & Levy, 1988; Zimmerman, 1989).

Lastly, the overachiever phenomenon may represent an anomaly, a coincidental but unexplainable change in learning behavior. In such cases, overachiever motivations represent unrelated and non-traceable

influences and characteristics, perhaps due more to instructional or evaluative effort than to behavior change in learners who correct skill mastery problems unexpectedly. Certainly, research does point to the inconsistency of educational labels (Foster, 1986; Graham & Barker, 1990), and to the dubious influence of incentives as important factors in the so-called phenomenon of overachievement (Hyland, 1989).

Conclusions

Despite the suggestion that overachievers represent an anomaly, there is little doubt that continued research in the area of motivational psychology and incentive-based behavior modification is necessary. Many students overcome problems of classroom learning and succeed—so clearly, in fact, that there must be some sort of untraced pattern of learning. Unfortunately, the lack of strong clinical research in the field of overachiever psychology hinders the development of effective instructional models for potential overachiever clients. It is clear that a pattern exists among overachievers and that various incentive programs can nurture potential overachievers. Thus, it is imperative that further study in the field of overachiever students expand into the areas of identification, characterization, and behavioral psychology.

The focus of such studies should seek to identify the kinds of stimuli that most motivate overachievers to perform, and to match the results with potential overachievers as identified in this monograph. If a model can be established to link potential overachievers to the appropriate kinds of stimuli, then it will be possible to foster overachiever productivity. The key to understanding overachiever stimuli rests in a thorough analysis of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and incentives.

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