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Motivation and the Underachieving Child

When Seng Chan, a Secondary Four student, scored A's and B's in the mid-year examinations, his parents were overjoyed. Ever since John entered secondary school, he has been unmotivated and careless in his school work. He has been absent from school this year, first for two weeks because of chicken-pox and then, off and on for about a term. Although he is a likeable chap and is popular with his classmates, his teachers complained that he often does not complete or hand in his assignments. Lately, he has failed in two class tests. Seng Chan's parents are concerned. They are convinced he is a bright boy and would do well in his school work if he applied himself as diligently as he did when he was in primary school. They went to see Seng Chan's teacher who spent some time explaining where his weaknesses in certain subjects were. Seng Chan was fortunate that his parents engaged a tutor to help him in some of the subjects he was weak in. Their efforts paid off as can be seen by his mid-year results.

Angeline, a Primary Six pupil, who did very well in school till this year, now finds excuses not to go to school. In school, she daydreams and slouches on her desk, does not participate in class unless called upon to do so. She is fairly well-liked by her peers and in fact has been ticked off by teachers for talking to her classmates in class when teaching was going on. Her teachers wish she would appear a little bit more interested in her lessons. At home, she spends long hours in front of the television set. Before the implementation of the time-based telephone system, she used to chatter on the phone with friends. When asked about her homework, she says she has completed all her work at school.

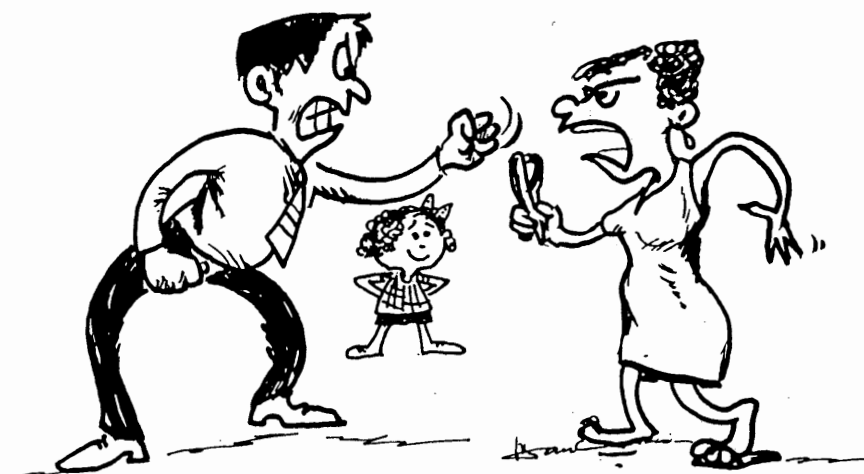
Her father feels that since school is already such a "pressure cooker", they, as parents should back off and allow their daughter to enjoy some of her childhood. Her mother feels differently. Being a teacher herself, she knows how competitive students can be. She believes that Angeline should study consistently and very hard in order to score good grades so that she can get into a "good" secondary school after the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examination). That is the only way to get into a "good" JC (Junior College) and later into one of the local universities. Being a smart girl, Angeline plays one parent against the other to get her way and family quarrels often centre around this problem. Rather than waiting for Angeline to get over her lethargic mood, her mother took Angeline in hand, revised her school work with her at home every day and saw to it that she did all her homework.

These two children are not isolated cases. Most schools have their fair share of children who are not performing as well as they should. The tragic thing is that these children

have the ability to succeed but because of a number of reasons, are not doing so.

John and Angeline are what we call "underachievers", and although they are two different kinds of underachievers, they share some similar characteristics. Both are students who possess intellectual abilities but are not performing well in school work. They are well liked by peers and are accepted by their classmates. Both did good work in the earlier years of school and as the years pass, their grades and test scores started to fall until their lack of interest in school work was apparent to teachers and parents. They were both fortunate to have parents who helped them to overcome their learning difficulties.

Other underachievers are not so lucky. Many are left to flounder on their own and some children drop out of school, not because they lack the ability to succeed. Many of these children are bright young people who score well enough to "get by" in primary school but find that they cannot "get by" any more in secondary



Playing one parent against the other

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school. They may not be top students in primary school but they possess at least average intelligence and are capable of passing their examinations each year. They certainly should not be failing in school. However, not all children who get poor marks or fail in school are underachievers. Some children who receive borderline passes or who fail, are in fact performing at their best. These are low achievers or slow learners who because of their more limited ability, cannot realistically be expected to perform as well as their more capable peers.

Children underachieve for different reasons. Students, like Seng Chan, who usually do well may fall behind because short and frequent absences from school result in crucial concepts being poorly grasped and understood and insufficient practice in the application of these concepts. Import-

tant lessons are thus missed and there are too many gaps in their learning. Unless these gaps are bridged fairly soon, learning becomes less and less meaningful and students feel that work is beyond their ability and they lose interest altogether.

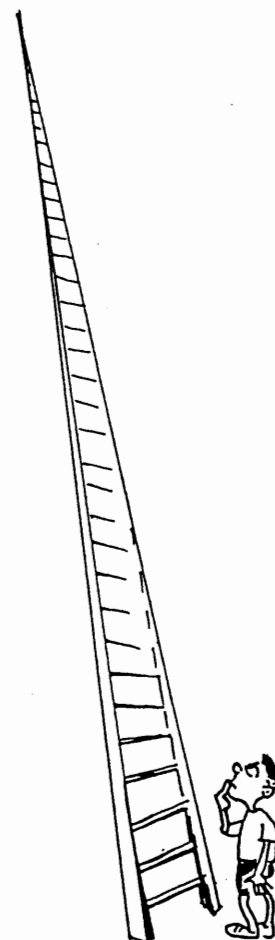
Some able students streamed into classes with less able peers do not do well in school because they want to be popular and accepted by their classmates. If these students are not identified and given work commensurate with their abilities, they will slide further and further down the academic ladder and become failures too. Some children perform below their capacity because they feel they cannot measure up to their parents' expectations. These underachievers probably have ambitious, tertiary-educated parents who make greater and greater demands on them. When they fear that they may not be able to meet these demands, they are turned off and may give problems in school and schoolwork. Disenchantment with some area(s) of learning may be the result of unpleasant or traumatic experiences with over enthusiastic teachers or a hostile class environment. Others may come from deprived homes where expectations are low. Another important reason for lack of achievement may be motivation, or rather a lack of it.

Children do not set out to fail in school. Many able children do because they receive hidden rewards when they do not do well in school. They strike out at others such as their parents, in anger. Some of these children crave attention from parents and they receive it (perhaps for the wrong reason) when teachers send for parents to complain about their children's poor school performance. It could be a way of showing passive resistance towards parents for making unreasonable demands on them. For whatever reasons able children underachieve, they need help in understanding their own motivations.

Able and gifted children often *begin* school with *positive* attitudes towards school but fail to maintain these attitudes because they find a lack of challenge in their school work. They need a differentiated curriculum and teaching approaches that meet their needs and interests. Research

studies have shown that these children are easily bored in regular classes where instruction is aimed at the average ability children (Tempest, 1974; Feldhusen & Kroll, 1985). They find the level of instruction too low, the pace too slow and little opportunity to pursue their studies to a depth that is more commensurate with their abilities. Students, like Angeline, escape into daydreams in class probably due to boring and unsatisfying curriculum and find social interaction more rewarding.

Among several mitigating factors associated with underachievement, low self-esteem seems to be experienced by most of these children. Often a fear of failure is a factor too, and the student decides that it is better not to try than to attain high standards of perfection and fail. Or the student may fear success and the increasingly high expectations of parents and teachers and their inability to meet those expectations. Although most children naturally



High standards

want to please the significant adults in their lives, bright youngsters may decide that the cost of striving to excel academically is too great in terms of the risk of failure involved, the social sacrifices they have to make, and the time and effort they have to expend in order to ensure success. Furthermore, choosing to pursue a less vigorous lifestyle has its compensations. If they perform just well enough to pass, parents and teachers will leave them alone as their expectations will be reduced and there will be less pressure from them. They will then have time to pursue other interests and there is little danger of disappointing their parents, causing tension and even alienation at home. Similarly, there will be less conflict with teachers who tend to expect more from abler students.

To parents and teachers, it seems such a paradox that the able, sometimes gifted child, should behave as if he/she is unmotivated to learn or unable to excel in school when he/she clearly is able to do so without too much effort. This situation often invokes feelings of guilt that perhaps one party lacks good parenting skills and the other party cannot teach.

Parents and teachers may be in conflict over how to cope with the underachiever and in their view regarding the responsibility of the other. Keeping in mind that the child can be manipulative and defensive, the scene is set for the parents and teachers to believe that the other party is either not doing enough of the needed things or is doing harmful things to the child. To combat this problem, it is essential that there be a close working relationship between home and school. One way of achieving this home-school collaboration is to hold meetings between parents and teachers and later between parents, teachers and child concerned to work out an acceptable plan of action. During this meeting with the child, it is important that the parents and teachers establish a strong parental posture. This posture should send out a "we care, we are concerned and we will do something" message to the child.

Teachers are in a good position to motivate underachievers. When the classroom is a warm and caring place

to meet and work together, children will have a sense of belonging. They are less likely to cause problems if the atmosphere is aimed at nurturing involvement and stimulating learning contributions from the pupils. Reserving special comments for extra effort put in by pupils is right; however, for students disappointed with school, a kind word sometimes relieves the anguish and anxiety caused by constant failure. Positive communication from teachers can raise a student's interest in learning and teachers should exploit this to advantage.

In addition, varied teaching methods and approaches help to relieve boredom and predictability for underachievers. These strategies should match different student learning style characteristics. Reflective teaching and thinking about what happens in a classroom, asking questions and probing for correct solutions to problems will promote learning and motivate underachievers. According to Brophy (1987), strategies for motivating students to learn apply not only to performance on tests or assignments, but also to information-processing activities (paying attention to lessons, reading for understanding, paraphrasing ideas) initially involved in learning the content or skills. The emphasis is not merely on offering students in-

centives for good performance later but on stimulating them to use thoughtful learning.

Without a doubt, underachievers have gaps in the mastery of essential skills. In most cases, they drift along until repeated failure singles them out for attention. With extra help from parents and teachers at an early stage, they can improve their self-concept and motivation and become successful learners in school.

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Relieving boredom...

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