

Mentoring Gifted Underachieving Males

Excerpts from selected articles by T. P. Hébert and F. R. Olenchak

Source: Mentors for Gifted Underachieving Males: Developing Potential and Realizing Promise. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 44(3), 196–207

Authors: T. P. Hébert and F. R. Olenchak

Date: Summer 2000

Mentorships have historically been viewed as one avenue to the acquisition of knowledge and perfection of skill among child prodigies. Spontaneous mentorships arise naturally when adult experts recognize strong potential and motivation in individuals with whom they share common interest. The experts then take the protégés under their tutelage, offering protection, nurturance and guidance while the prodigies work to fulfill their potential. Seminal studies in the field of gifted education have noted the frequent presence of mentors in the lives of highly successful, eminent people (Torrance, 1984; Kaufman et al., 1986) and have captured the attention of educators searching for effective strategies to develop the talents of special populations of students.

Increasingly, evidence exists that gifted young men are at special risk for developing academic and social problems that include serious academic and behavioral problems, self-identity and self-esteem concerns, and even denial of talent (Alvino, 1991, Ford, 1996, Hébert, 1997, Olenchak, 1995; Seeley, 1993). Thanks to numerous research studies, professionals have uncovered some factors contribution to underachievement among gifted youth (Baum, Rnesulli, & Hevert, 1995; Ford, 1993; Frasier, Passow, & Goldbert, 1958; Rimm, 1986; Whitmore, 1980); but, there remains limited and inconclusive research on effective strategies for reversing it.

To enhance the understanding of the significance of mentorships in reversing the underachievement in gifted males, this article describes three case studies of high-ability young men and the mentors who had a critical impact on their lives.

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Based on the findings revealed in each case, a single core category emerged: the influence of a significant adult on a young person. There were, however, several related subcategories. First, the open-minded and non-judgmental characteristics of the mentor were required to sustain an on-going relationship. Second, as a natural quality of a caring adult friend, each mentor provided his protégé with consistent and personalized social/emotional support and advocacy beyond that associated with simple instructor-student relationships. Finally, a plan of strength and interest-based strategies for intervention to reverse patterns of underachievement was implemented successfully in each case.

Corroborating Torrance's (1984) investigation, the mentor relationship experience by the three young men described in this study revealed that each matured socially and emotionally, becoming a colleague of an accepting adult who cared about him as an individual. In each case, the significant adult was a man who helped the young person contemplate the barricades to his creative productivity and then to develop appropriate plans and strategies for leaping those hurdles.

Source: Endangered Academic Talent: Lessons Learned from Gifted First Generation Males. *Journal of College Student Development*, p. 201

Authors: T. P. Hébert and F. R. Olenchak

Date: March/April 2002

Retrieved from:

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3752/is_200203/ai_n9071774/pg_20

Two case studies of men from diverse cultures, one African American and one Vietnamese American, illustrate the potential for underachievement among first-generation gifted students at comprehensive universities. Amplifying previous studies, this research provides a personal examination about attrition among undergraduates and highlights the influences on underachievement in two gifted university students. Conclusions suggest methods for universities to curb the problem as it relates to diverse, high-ability students.

Young people with high academic ability who excel during their elementary and secondary school years are not necessarily guaranteed similar success in their university experiences. The transitions academically and socially from high school to college are well recognized, but these challenges may seem even more daunting for students who represent the first to pursue higher education from their immediate families. Although the theoretical literature offers several explanations related to underachievement concerns in gifted school-aged students (Baker, Bridger, & Evans, 1998), limited research exists pertaining directly to gifted young people of college age, particularly literature focusing on gifted first-generation collegians.

Researchers in higher education have identified a number of variables contributing to student attrition and underachievement. These include weak or missing skills necessary for academic success and presence of disabilities interfering in collegiate work (Farley & Elmore, 1992; Vogel & Adelman, 1992), as well as negative experiences in prior schooling (Wilder, 1992). In addition, issues such as immaturity (Bean, 1990; Janos, Sanfilippo, & Robinson, 1986), self-esteem (Brand & Dodd, 1998; Crook, Healy, & O'Shea, 1984), unrealistic academic expectations (G. O. Brown, 1994), and inherent learning difficulties (Dunn, 1995) have been examined for their contribution to academic problems among otherwise talented college students.

Although programs can be most helpful, they cannot replace the absence of a high quality, caring, and concerned faculty and staff.... Effective retention calls for sustained effort on the part of all institutional members to give to each and every student serious and honest attention on a daily basis.

Source: Managing His Image: The challenge facing a gifted male. *Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted*.

Author: T. P. Hébert

Date: 2004

Retrieved from:

http://www.sengifted.org/articles_social/Hebert_ManagingHisImage.shtml

There are a number of strategies that educators, counselors, or parents may want to consider implementing to change the underachieving behaviors in gifted boys due to issues of image. The role of image could easily become a topic for a discussion group with gifted males. With the help of an empathic teacher, young men may be able to provide each other with support to cope with a peer group that does not value their intellectual abilities.

Another strategy, the use of biographies of gifted men who faced this issue in school, may also be helpful to gifted teenagers. Teacher- or counselor-guided classroom discussions centered on the biographies can provide gifted young men with new insights and strategies to deal with a macho culture that is unappreciative of their talents (Hébert, 1995).

Exposing gifted teenage males to role models in a school setting may motivate them to assume a more appropriate image. Inviting successful men from the community as guest speakers on this topic may be helpful. Men who are achieving professionally may have suggestions for younger men who are troubled with the role of image. In addition, these successful professionals may serve as mentors to gifted males who may need the guidance and friendship of a caring adult role model. These adults can relate how they felt as bright adolescents and how they dealt with similar issues related to fitting into a macho culture.

A creative teacher working with a counselor and parents may want to try several of these strategies to assist gifted males. With the help of caring adults, bright young men will begin to realize that the role of image need not be a challenge.