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ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT:
A REFORMULATION AND RECTIFICATION*

ABSTRACT: With the increasing importance that our society is placing on education, the problem of underachievement in schools has come to take on considerable social significance. Numerous attempts have been made to rectify the kind of irrational factors which help prevent a young person from meeting one of society's first demands — that of satisfactory school performance. This paper discusses some of the existing literature on the subject, especially a rather effective technique suggested by Ellis.

INTRODUCTION

Never before has the need for understanding of the factors which contribute to school success been quite as acute as it is now (Raph, Goldberg, & Passow, 1967). The ever broadening spectrum of our scientific and technological progress, from the harnessing of atomic energy to the "race into space," has placed a special premium on talent and brain power in all areas of human endeavor.

The most critical waste of a nation's manpower resources is students of high ability who leave school early, who do not go to college, or who drop out of college prematurely. This makes academic failure one of the major problems, both a direct challenge and a paramount issue, confronting education in schools and colleges today.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Students whose academic achievement is not commensurate with their capacities have been the recipients of much concern and study. However, as Peterson (1963) has pointed out in a review of the literature on the subject, the results of these studies are largely inconclusive and often contradictory.

First of all, the definition of the term "academic underachievement" appears to lack consensus. Most definitions of underachievement center around the discrepancy between actual and predicted performance. Most observers are in general agreement that the phenomenon is adequately defined in some such terms as: "an academic underachiever is a student who has the measured ability to achieve a level of academic success significantly above that which he actually obtains (Golburgh & Penney, 1962, p. 133)." While this definition at a theoretical level is acceptable to most educational researchers, lack of consensus at a practical level still remains. The main reason for this problem is in getting a measure of potential that is independent of and uncontaminated by present achievement.

Underachievement is a complex phenomenon which appears to be clearly related to problems of the child in many areas: personal adjustment, parent-child relationships, social acceptance, self-concept, etc. Many studies (as reviewed by Jackson, 1968) have been directed toward the identification of personality correlates of underachievement. However, the findings of these studies are often paradoxical (Peterson, 1963).

Pierce (1961) attempted to differentiate between able high- and able low-achieving high-school students on a number of non-intellectual variables. The sample consisted of the top thirty percent in intellectual ability of tenth and twelfth grade students. The study showed a significantly better adjustment on the part of the high-achieving boys and girls, as measured by the California Psychological Inventory, than was true for the low achievers. DeHirsch (1963), in a clinical study of adolescents with marked scholastic difficulties, also came to a similar conclusion.

On the other hand, there are studies which fail to differentiate the underachieving group from the normal or overachieving population on personal adjustment scores (McGuire, 1962). It could be that the inconclusive and somewhat contradictory evidence on the relationship of personal adjustment to achievement is due to the problems inherent in assessing personality functioning, the types of instruments used to measure adjustment, and the varying definitions of underachievement.

The onset of academic underachievement in bright children has been the subject of a great deal of speculation but very little research. Shaw and Grubb (1958), after reviewing the findings of their study on able high school underachievers, are of the opinion that the genesis of underachievement goes back to pre-high-school years.

Shaw and McCuan (1960), on the basis of comparison between groups of high ability achievers and underachievers at every grade level from one through eleven, found that the male underachievers tended to receive grades lower than the achievers beginning in grade one, and that this difference became highly significant at grade three. The female underachievers, on the other hand, actually somewhat exceeded achievers in grade-point average for the first five years of school. This situation was reversed by the beginning of grade six. It seems safe to conclude then that underachievement appears relatively early in the child's life and unless arrested keeps developing as the person grows older (Jackson, 1968).

Underachieving behavior may be shaped by parental attitudes. But the findings concerning the influence of parental variables on school performance are equivocal. Attempts have been made, with some degree of success, to find the family relations correlates of academic achievement. For example, Kimball (1953) found a positive association between high-school achievement and the degree of emotional support in the home. A causal link between disturbance in parent-child interactions and the child's cognitive impairment has been reported by Wallach, Ulrich, and Grunebaum (1960).

Underachievement may not only be a reaction to family factors,

but there appear to be certain contributing factors in the peer group of the child. Tannenbaum (1962) investigated peer attitudes toward academic brilliance amongst adolescents. He found that the students described as brilliant, highly studious, nonathletic, ranked the lowest. Peer approval is highly reinforcing for the underachiever. In this connection, the study of Evans and Oswalt (1968), exploring the impact of peers on underachievers, is pertinent. Evans and Oswalt found that academic progress can be accelerated by arranging contingencies in such a manner that peer influence is brought to bear on the subjects' academic performance. Underachievement seems to be a form of individual asociality anchored in peer-clique asociality. Communications from the child's immediate academic peer group may constitute one of the more decisive determinants of achievement.

In recent years the self-concept, defined as the sum total of attitudes and feelings that a person has regarding himself, has received considerable attention from researchers as a central feature of underachievement. Payne and Farquhar (1962) have postulated that a student's self-concept is a functionally limiting or facilitating factor which interacts with motivation in academic achievement. Brookover, Paterson, and Thomas (1962) studied the relationship between self-concept and achievement with over 1,000 junior high students. They found a positive relationship between the self-concept of ability in a given subject and performance in that subject. However, Fink (1962) found that the relationship between the self-concept and achievement was upheld in the case of boys only. Shaw and Grubb (1958) also reported male underachievers as having more negative feelings about themselves than equally bright achieving boys. Crowne and Stephens (1961) see self-acceptance as having promise for becoming an increasingly attractive focus of interest in underachievement research.

The dilemma of ascribing cause or effect to self-concept in scholastic attainment poses problems not readily amenable to present research methods. Self-concept may be both the cause and the effect of underachievement (Jackson, 1968). According to Friedenberg (1959), the youngster who fails in school, having discovered that he is good at nothing, stands a strong chance of becoming good for nothing. Failure, just like success, appears to be cumulative. In sum, deficiency in self-esteem may be a significant determinant of underachievement.

Underachievers come to place an inordinate amount of responsibility in the hands of teachers and others. Negative attitudes toward school are far more common among underachievers than achievers. Underachievers also show elements of helplessness. A typical comment: "I keep on telling myself that I am going to do my best but when the time comes, well I get in trouble, and *I can't help it.* I don't know."

Numerous attempts have been made to explain the kind of irrational beliefs which prevent a young person from meeting one of society's first demands, that of satisfactory school work. Hummel and Sprinthall (1965) compared the attitudes of intellectually superior achievers with equally bright underachievers. They found the under-

achievers to be more fatalistic in their expectations concerning outcomes of personal efforts and less willing to postpone immediate gratifications.

Anxiety too can help explain the disparity between ability and performance (Raph *et al.*, 1967). Several researchers (Alpert & Haber, 1960; Bricklin & Bricklin, 1967) have established achievement anxiety to be a variable of which test performance is a function. It appears, therefore, that test anxiety is a correlate of underachievement.

It can be concluded that underachieving students generally hold irrational beliefs (Conklin, 1965) and exhibit high anxiety (Andrews, 1969). Furthermore, the greater the degree and number of irrational ideas, the more the extent of avoidant behavior and, hence, the lower the performance (Lafferty, 1963).

Thus in recent years, a considerable body of empirical data has accumulated indicating a relationship between personality factors such as irrational beliefs, anxiety, and underachievement. Indeed, academic underachievement is a multi-faceted phenomenon (Raph *et al* 1967).

Attempts to Rectify Underachievement

A variety of programs designed to overcome underachievement exists. However, numerous studies have reported the relative ineffectiveness of many of these current treatment approaches.

In an attempt to explore the effects of perceptual training on scholastic achievement of elementary school underachievers, Goins (1958) failed to obtain any significant change in reading ability.

After a year of experimentation with a program of home visitation as a means of raising the academic attainment of high school students, Schoenhard (1958) reported the failure of the experiment to establish the value of the program of guidance that was used.

One of the oldest, and still most commonly used, methods of assisting academic underachievers is tutoring. In spite of the appearance of validity the results have not been encouraging (Raph *et al.*, 1967).

Some studies indicate that training in study skills is effective to a certain degree. For example, Blake (1956) reported positive findings at the University of Maryland. Of course, what he failed to mention was the extent to which this improvement could, in fact, be attributed to incidental counseling. Training in study habits and attitudes may not be the best mode of helping academic underachievers (Zingle, 1965). A survey of the literature also indicates that other approaches such as teacher-student interviews (Moore & Popham, 1960), and warnings by the administrators (Zingle, 1965) have been tried but found wanting.

If underachievement is not a surface phenomenon which is easily changed (Shaw & Grubb, 1958), then the problem demands personality modification.

Individual counseling for academic recovery (Calhoun, 1956) is one of the many types of endeavors which have been tried for some time now. Golburgh and Penney (1962) recommend *sector counseling,*

a specific limiting technique similar to what Tyler (1960) has called "minimum change therapy." In sector counseling the underachiever is helped to recognize the possibilities that are open to him for directional shift concerning the academic situation.

Baymur and Patterson (1960) investigated the hypothesis that therapeutic counseling is effective in reducing underachievement. While the results of the overall analysis of variance were not significant, the comparisons of counseled versus non-counseled students yielded positive results on two of the criteria: adjustment and grade-point average. Zingle (1965) attempted to help underachievers through rational-emotive counseling. He reported positive results.

However, there are other studies which fail to provide any significant evidence in support of individual counseling as a means of assisting underachievers (Andrews, 1969).

Even though counseling has emerged, in recent years, as one of the most widely used methods of attempting to help underachievers, the findings remain paradoxical. Could it be that the counselors have focused on underachievement and not on the individual? As Peterson (1963) puts it: "Like other behavior, underachievement is meaningful only in terms of the actor himself (p. 381)."

Few, if any, of those who have studied underachievement, have addressed themselves to this question: What purpose does scholastic failure serve for the underachiever? Perhaps this is why there is a dearth of literature regarding successful treatment of underachievers.

A major productive direction in which the rectification of underachievement is moving involves the context of group therapy (Roth, Mauksch, & Peiser, 1967). Some studies which have employed group psychotherapy with underachievers reported success in raising academic performance, while other studies reported no success whatsoever.

In an investigation of non-directive group therapy with freshmen students in academic difficulty, Sheldon and Landsman (1950) report a significant relationship between counseling and increased grades. With high-anxious college students, Spielberger, Weitz, and Denny (1962) found improved GPA following group therapy. Chestnut (1965) reported data suggesting that underachieving college students improve their grades through group therapy. On the other hand, Broedel and co-workers (1960), in their study of the effects of group counseling on gifted underachieving adolescents, reported no significant improvement in grades. Winborn and Schmidt (1962) reported that short-term counseling tended to produce even a negative effect upon the academic achievement of potentially superior freshman as reflected by their academic grades. The authors recommended additional research.

The existing research reports concerning the effect of group counseling on underachievers are inconsistent. Perhaps the contradictory findings can be attributable to the lack of clarification of the therapeutic approaches utilized.

The demand for further research, and the increasing shift to an emphasis on the client's relationships with other people, has brought with it an influx of new therapeutic strategies. For example,

it is becoming increasingly apparent that the therapist must confront and accept responsibility as an active teacher and shaper of behavior (Stieper & Wiener, 1965). This is the direction in which psychotherapy seems to be developing. What is really needed is a specifiable group counseling approach based on an explicit theoretical rationale. Ellis (1963) has developed such a technique — rational-emotive psychotherapy.

RATIONAL GROUP APPROACH

Rational therapy (RT) rests on the rather basic assumption that man's emotion and his thinking are *not* entirely different processes. The two are interrelated and overlap significantly. In fact, thinking and emotion are so closely related that not only do they usually accompany each other but act in a circular cause-and-effect relationship. One's thinking often becomes one's emotions (Ellis, 1963). The sustained emotions depend very heavily on one's philosophic attitudes. In other words, man's values and his emotions are the products of his *basic* premises.

Further, it is hypothesized that since man is a uniquely sign-, symbol-, and language-creating animal, both thinking and emoting tend to take the form of self-talk or internalized sentences. Thus, for all practical purposes, the sentences that human beings keep telling themselves *are* or *become* their thoughts and emotions (Ellis, 1958). It follows that man can gain an appreciable control over his emotions by controlling his thoughts.

Ellis further believes that human beings are the kinds of animals who, when raised in any society like ours, tend to fall victim to several major fallacious ideas. People repeatedly keep reindoctrinating themselves with these ideas in an unthinking, auto-suggestive manner, and, consequently, continue actualizing them in overt behavior.

Some of the major illogical and irrational ideas which, according to Ellis (1963, pp. 60-88), are presently very common in Western civilization and seem inevitably to lead to difficulties, are summarized below.

1. The idea that it is a dire necessity for an adult human being to be loved or approved by virtually every significant other person in his community.

2. The idea that one should be thoroughly competent, adequate, and achieving in all possible respects if one is to consider oneself worthwhile.

3. The idea that certain people are bad, wicked, or villainous and that they should be severely blamed or punished for their villainy.

4. The idea that it is awful and catastrophic when things are not the way one would very much like them to be.

5. The idea that human unhappiness is externally caused and that people have little or no ability to control their sorrows and disturbances.

6. The idea that if something is or may be dangerous or fearsome one should be terribly concerned about it and should keep dwelling on the possibility of its occurring.

7. The idea that it is easier to avoid than to face certain life difficulties and self-responsibilities.

8. The idea that one should be dependent on others and needs someone stronger than oneself on whom to rely.

9. The idea that one's past history is an all-important determiner of one's present behavior and that because something once strongly affected one's life, it should indefinitely have a similar effect.

10. The idea that one should become quite upset over other people's problems and disturbances.

11. The idea that there is invariably a right, precise, and perfect solution to human problems and that it is catastrophic if this perfect solution is not found.

The central theme of RT theory is that it is the foregoing kinds of illogical ideas which are the basic causes of most emotional disturbances or neuroses.

Neurosis, then, usually seems to originate in and be perpetuated by some fundamentally unsound, irrational ideas. The individual comes to believe in some unrealistic, impossible, often perfectionistic goals — especially the goals that he should always be approved by everyone, should do everything perfectly well, and should never be frustrated in any of his desires — and then, in spite of considerable contradictory evidence, refuses to give up his original illogical beliefs (Ellis, 1958, pp. 43-44).

According to Ellis, an effective therapist should continually keep unmasking his client's past, but especially his present illogical thinking or self-defeating verbalizations. The rational therapist does so by: (a) bringing the irrational philosophies to the client's attention; (b) showing him how they are maintaining his present disturbances; (c) demonstrating precisely what the illogical links in his internalized sentences are; and (d) teaching him how to re-think these and similar other sentences. The

rational psychotherapist makes a concerted attack on the disturbed individual's irrational positions in two main ways:
(a) The therapist serves as a frank counter-propagandist who directly contradicts and denies the self-defeating propaganda and superstitions which the client has originally learned and which he is now self-propagandistically perpetuating.
(b) The therapist encourages, persuades, cajoles, and at times commands the client to partake in some kind of activity which itself will act as a forceful counter-propagandist agency against the nonsense he believes (Ellis, 1958, p. 45).

The therapist must make an unequivocal attack, keep pounding away, time and again, at the illogical ideas underlying the client's fears, in order to induce him to adopt a more rational philosophy of living. Thus, the rational therapist attempts to go beyond the subject's

immediate problems in order to provide the subject with generalized ways of problem solving.

There are reasons to suspect that group therapy has several inherent advantages over individual therapy. For example, it can be argued that human personality is embedded in the social matrix in which man lives. Human functioning is grounded in the group. *What* man does and *how* he relates to the group, and what in turn the group does to him, are subjects of concern to the behavioral scientist. The small group setting represents a microcosm of society and as such offers the participants unique opportunities for therapeutic experiences. Individual members learn from each other even in "sharing" their personal problems. (According to Mowrer (1964) one of the values commonly attributed to group psychotherapy is that it breaks down the insularity of its participants, and shows them that they are not unique and that their problems are common.) The relatively safe environment presents prompt experimentation with newly acquired attitudes and values.

According to Ellis (1963), the theory of rational-emotive psychotherapy lends itself logically to the group setting. The main goals of rational groups are twofold. The first is to provide an atmosphere in which the participants can freely open up to each other about their most intimate thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. The second goal is to show each participant why he behaves in certain important ways and further to attack the philosophic underpinnings of his inappropriate emotions and behavior (Ellis, 1969).

Usually the therapy sessions begin with someone presenting a personal problem. To this the rest of the group acts and reacts. The other members, acting as auxiliary therapists, *question and challenge* the presenting member. No holds are barred in the group (Ellis, 1963). Immediate and authentic "feed back" informs the recipient in unmistakable terms of just what impact he has on others in the group.

Ellis (1963) suggests some of the main advantages of rational-group therapy over individual therapy. Firstly, the setting often provides a kind of therapeutic climate where members share their experiences with each other. Secondly, members act as auxiliary therapists. Their role playing sets up cognitive dissonance which usually results in changes in beliefs and hence changes in behavior. Thirdly, the combined power of the group, when brought to bear on an individual member's irrational philosophies, is generally more effective in changing his self-indoctrinations than if the therapist is alone. Homework assignments, given and received during group therapy, are more often carried to completion than are homework assignments given in individual therapy.

As the group approximates the society at large, and since the members socially interact within the group, the therapist does not have to rely on verbal reports of progress. In this way, the disparity between what one reports and what he actually does or feels is reduced.

It can be assumed that a group is capable of offering a greater diversity of hypotheses about human problems than can any therapist. "In many respects, therefore, rational group therapy has concrete

advantages over individual psychotherapy (Ellis, 1963, p. 313)."

It can, therefore, be hypothesized that rational group counseling, through its concerted attack on anxious underachievers' irrational assumptions, will create conditions which alter anxiety, and thereby change performance. The present author (Sharma, 1970) has been engaged in an attempt to rectify the academic underachievement in anxious high-school students through rational group counseling. Results with a sample of such students have shown success and will be reported at a later date.

RESUME: En raison de l'importance croissante que notre société accorde à l'éducation, le problème du sous-rendement académique a pris une signification sociale considérable.

On s'est efforcé à plusieurs reprises d'éliminer les facteurs irrationnels qui contribuent à empêcher une jeune personne de satisfaire à l'une des exigences fondamentales de la société — nommément celle d'obtenir des résultats scolaires satisfaisants.

Cet article traite de quelques travaux publiés dans ce domaine, et en particulier d'une technique assez efficace qu'a suggérée Ellis.

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