

# What causes G&T students to underachieve?

**Ben Rule**

Ben set out to investigate the causes of underachievement by asking G&T students from Year 10 to work as peer coaches with 15 underachieving Year 8 G&T students. The coaches helped Ben to identify the causes of underachievement through collecting interview and questionnaire data. Like other researchers, Ben found key reasons for underachievement included:

- lack of challenge in the classroom (commented on by 12 students)
- a mismatch between teaching & learning styles (8 students)
- differences between teacher & student expectations about levels of attainment (8 students).

But Ben also identified other factors not previously explored by the research lit-

**It would be wrong to conclude that the students are underachievers, when in fact they have chosen not to engage with learning at all**

erature – in particular, that underachieving G&T students may lack the study skills that enable them to translate their abilities into achievement (commented on by 10 students). The findings challenged a commonly held view that the main cause of underachievement in G&T students is choosing to sacrifice achievement in order to fit in better socially. Only four of the students commented that they were affected by negative peer pressure.

As well as helping to identify the causes of underachievement, the peer coaches were also effective at helping to tackle some of them.

## Mismatch between teaching and learning styles

Just over half the students were clear that they had lost the motivation to do well in at least one of their subjects due

to a clash between their style of learning and the teacher's style of teaching. The most common complaint from the students was that learning activities in the classroom provided them with little choice about how to complete them – they were given few opportunities to be original, creative or develop their own ideas. They felt they were being told what to think and say in order to do well. The mismatch typically happened in the subjects in which the students were most able.

For example, one student underachieved in English and humanities more than in other subjects because she disliked having to complete lots of short, structured answers. She preferred to write longer pieces that explored open-ended questions. Another student who had a passion for art, underachieved in the subject because he questioned his teacher's conventional methods – he wanted to be more explorative and innovative in the techniques and materials he used for his work.

Just over half the students who were critical of the learning styles they were

## An interview with Ben Rule

Ben runs a Learning and Teaching research group at his school which placed much emphasis on students with Special Educational Needs. The group had become particularly concerned that gifted and talented children were possibly more vulnerable to pressures such as fear of failure and perfectionism than other students, and that these were causing them to underachieve. The group decided to research this issue by exploring how students come to terms with their 'giftedness'. The research project involved able Year 10 students peer coaching Year 8 students to help identify and tackle the reasons for the younger students' underachievement. The project was so successful that "within a year, peer coaching was taking place with all year groups".

Ben's school was very supportive of the project. It made gifted and talented learning its focus for staff training that year. The research project helped to open up a dialogue which was used to shape the provision for gifted and talented learners in the school. Many changes of practice were implemented as a result. For example, the school reviewed and improved its praise and rewards policy because staff felt that excellence had been taken for granted in the past, and had been

rewarded insufficiently. Teachers had felt they were providing opportunities for challenge in the classroom but the students didn't always agree. Many had also assumed that highly achieving boys would naturally be able to write well when in fact they found that many were auditory learners. The teaching in top sets now takes account of this.

**Ben advises anyone thinking of tackling a similar research project to "Think small and then reduce it even more. Focus on just a few students".**

**Ben Rule**, is Assistant Head for Learning and Teaching, at Ringwood Comprehensive School, New Forest. At the time of his research Ben was AST for Learning and teaching at Twynham comprehensive School, Dorset.



forced to work within, admitted that they spent at least one hour a week working at home on their own projects which were related in some way to a subject at school, but which they had generated themselves and which they would never share with their teacher. This included a boy who had learnt to speak Elvish, a fantasy language based entirely on an alien alphabet, syntax and structure, yet who was placed in set 3 for French because he did not engage with NC level 1 vocabulary.

### Needing to be challenged

Ben found that confusion over the difference between 'learning' and 'work' caused some students to be labelled as underachievers, when in fact they were not underachieving at all. This seemed to be particularly true of auditory learners, especially boys. For example, four of the boys said that they saw no point in making notes and writing down factual information which they had either read about in textbooks or heard the teacher explain at the start of the lesson. They felt that writing it down did not enable them to remember it any better and in fact interrupted their thinking about the subject. They felt they could gain more by discussing the subject in greater depth and complexity than recording information on paper.

The issue for these boys was that their need to be challenged was not met. The types of work the students were being given was in effect preventing them from using their initiative, being creative, questioning, analysing and working collaboratively – in other words, all the things that brought learning to life for them. Situations such as these caused gifted students to disengage from learning or disrupt the learning of others in the class.

### Needing help with study skills

Both boys and girls said that they would like to be taught revision skills to help them to prepare for tests and exams. Some felt they were able to get by without revision, but others found it hard to learn key information in a focused way that prepared them for tests. Similarly, students felt they would

**Peer coaches can play a very important role in helping establish a school culture where the focus is on learning and where it is positive to be bright and fashionable to achieve**

benefit from being taught a wider range of strategies for note taking, reading, writing and research; things that might have passed them by at earlier stages when their pre-existing knowledge about such strategies was unnecessary. They also hoped that the wider range of strategies might enable them to adapt pieces of work to their preferred styles of learning and thinking.

### How did peer coaching help to tackle underachievement?

Ben's study showed that peer coaching was effective at raising student effort and attainment where, in the minority of cases, the students' underachievement was due to relationship problems (negative peer pressure, friendship issues, low self-esteem or fear of failure). He suggested that the reason why peer coaching was effective

## Panel member Angela Hardman asks ... What could this research mean for you and your pupils?

Ben's research project found peer coaching was an effective way to identify and begin to tackle the reasons for student underachievement. It showed the main reasons for underachievement were lack of challenge in the classroom, a mismatch between teaching and learning styles and the students' lack of study skills.

- Where might peer coaching help staff and students in your school?
- Could you create more opportunity for students to evaluate and share their own learning needs?
- Could you do more to translate students' expressed wants and needs into action and change in your classroom?
- How could you find out if you are challenging gifted and talented students sufficiently?
- How might you equip your gifted and talented students with the study skills necessary to achieve at the highest level?

**Teachers, if they're not careful, can assume G&T students are naturally interested and self-motivated and that they like written work more than other types of work**

at overcoming relationship problems was due partly to the fact that the coaches were chosen because they were both gifted and popular with their own peer group. Being connected with the "in" set and one of the "cool" people in school helped the younger students to gain status in the eyes of their own peer group.

Peer coaching also helped to overcome relationship issues because the older students showed:

- understanding (which enabled the younger students to overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation)
- acceptance (which enabled the younger students to overcome their fear of failure and to feel more self-confident and therefore able to make and keep friends)
- objectivity (which enabled the younger students to analyse and reflect on their relationship problems).

The coaches helped the underachieving students gain a sense of perspective about the relationship problems that overshadowed their learning, and introduced them to more mature ways of dealing with the teasing, labelling, jealousy and back biting they sometimes faced.

Peer coaching was less effective where underachievement was due to lack of study skills, and lack of challenge in the classroom. Although the coaches passed on study skills and learning strategies to the Year 8 students, there was little improvement in their attainment. This was because their teachers did not reinforce the skills and strategies during lessons. Similarly, the coaches were unable to influence the extent to which lessons challenged gifted students.

### How was the study designed?

The Year 10 coaches drew up a learning questionnaire based on their initial meetings with their year 8 students and logged the key points of their discussions in subsequent meetings on cards. The cards and questionnaire responses were used to explore and categorise the reasons why the students underachieved. You can see the cards the coaches used and the questionnaire the coaches devised on page 15.

Ben also collected achievement data from the grades, comments and rewards that teachers gave to students for their attainment and effort, which he used to measure changes in the performance of able underachievers who had been coached.

### Find out more

Rule, B. (2006) Using peer coaches to explain and tackle the underachievement of gifted students. The National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth. Available from:

[http://www.nagty.ac.uk/research/practitioner\\_research/developing\\_expertise\\_awards\\_05\\_06.aspx](http://www.nagty.ac.uk/research/practitioner_research/developing_expertise_awards_05_06.aspx)

CPD in a nutshell, 'Gifted but not achieving: exploring underachievement in G&T pupils':

[http://www.nagty.ac.uk/professional\\_academy/nutshells/cross\\_phase.aspx](http://www.nagty.ac.uk/professional_academy/nutshells/cross_phase.aspx)

### How did the school identify the able underachievers?

All staff were given training on behaviours associated with underachieving and possible reasons for them. These included:

Behaviours	Possible reasons for behaviours
Challenges the relevance of the activities set.	"I simply can't learn like that ... I have a passion for this subject, but I'm frustrated that we can't study the really interesting bits."
Spars with and argues with the teacher.	"You tell me what to think and say; you make me jump through hoops. You give me no ownership or independence, no freedom or choice."
Comes alive in class discussion and says brilliant things in oral work, but written work shows total lack of effort, care and pride.	"I easily remember things the teacher says and things I read in books, so I don't see the point of having to write them down as well."
Extension work shows little effort, but there is evidence from what the student says that s/he has spent time on another, vaguely related area of work.	"I see no point in that piece of work, but I really need to learn about so many other things that fascinate me. That's why I spend hours on personal projects."
Finds it difficult to start a piece of work and even harder to finish it.	"I'm a perfectionist. I'm never happy with anything less than perfect marks. If I can't produce perfection, I won't hand anything in."
Hides their ability – won't show it for fear that others will see it.	"I can't do as well as my teachers expect me to." OR "I deliberately underachieve in an effort to gain acceptance or at least tolerance from peers."
Apologises and/or makes excuses for the quality of their work, even though it's good. Can't see why pieces of work are good – only sees what needs to be done to improve them.	"You think I'm clever, but I know I'm not I was lucky with that last piece of work. If I'm not careful, you'll find me out to be the fraud that I am."
Dependent on constant reassurance and encouragement.	"I'm not coping with the pressure. Please help me."
Says s/he doesn't know the answer to questions even when s/he does. Might copy the behaviour of those who get told off.	"There are lots of people in my class who will make fun of me if I am keen and get high marks."
Spends most of the time in class talking to friends.	"I just want to chat to my friends – people like me need to work harder at fitting in than others. I can catch up at home or at revision time."