

A Case Study of Achievement

"EVERYBODY talks about research. Why don't we do some?" With this question in mind, a dozen participants at the December 1958 ASCD Research Institute on "Underdeveloped Capacity to Learn" gathered in the Burlington Hotel in Washington, D. C., and began producing as well as consuming research.

During the days that followed, this study group gradually defined a problem and isolated major areas of concern to be examined. By the end of the week they had posed the question, "Which students in our schools are underachievers and what are they like?" Members of the group agreed to attempt to carry out the project during the remaining months of that school year, and one person was appointed to coordinate the study.

¹ Persons who collected data were: Amanda Herring, Tulsa, Oklahoma; A. R. Meyer, George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, Tennessee; Sam Sniderman, Highland Park, Michigan; Cordelia Stiles, Charlotte, North Carolina; V. V. Kniseley, San Bernardino, California; and Alma Brown and John Dewar, Overland Park, Kansas.

Persons who participated in defining problem and procedures but who did not collect data were: James R. Albert, Greeley, Colorado; Virginia Benson and Orlo Day, Fairfax, Virginia; Durlyn E. Wade, Northport, New York; Jerald Strickland, Sarasota, Florida; and John A. Permenter, Rockville, Maryland.

Coordinator of the group was: Jack R. Frymier, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Auburn.

These 12 persons, all but one from various public school systems across the United States, continued through correspondence to refine their problem and procedures during the weeks that followed. Finally they agreed upon common definitions and common methods.

Underachievers were defined as those persons who, at the fourth grade level, were achieving two or more years below their expected level of achievement as indicated by intelligence quotients. That is, if a fourth grade youngster had an IQ of 100 he was expected to achieve at fourth grade level on a battery-type achievement test. A student with an IQ of 90 was expected to achieve at third grade level, whereas sixth grade achievement was expected of one with an IQ of 120.

Specifically, the formula for determining expected achievement level involved equating an IQ of 100 with fourth grade achievement, and then varying either way from 100 so that one point of IQ was considered potentially equivalent to one tenth of a year's achievement as measured by a standardized, battery-type test. This definition was meant to be "severe"; those persons who were achieving two or more grade levels below expected grade level as defined would

most certainly be working considerably below capacity.

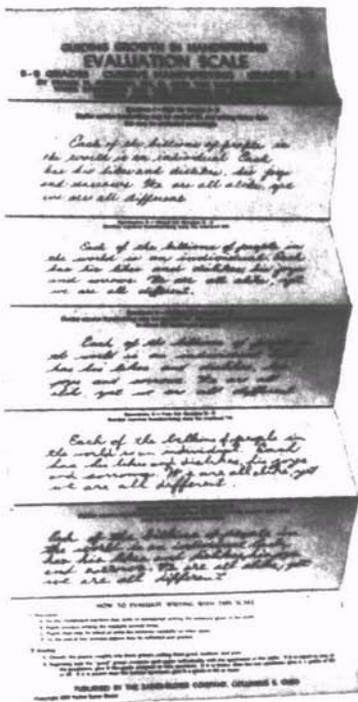
Having thus defined underachievement and having recognized many of the limitations and reservations involved regarding intelligence tests, achievement tests, and the relationships between the two, the group proceeded to set for itself the following specific problems:

1. Which children who were in fourth grade four years ago (1954-55) were underachievers at that time?
2. Which children so identified who are now in the eighth grade are still underachievers, and which ones have become achievers during the four year period?
3. What are these children like physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually, and are there any differences between those who are now achievers and those who are still underachievers?

This was to be essentially an exploratory, descriptive-type study, hence no specific hypotheses were projected. The members of the group felt that it was important to examine several aspects of the status of underachievers before making any effort to look at causal factors.

Several members met in Cincinnati at the national conference for a final discussion, and by April 1 the process of gathering data had begun.

With only two months remaining, the usual pressures of professional routine began to take their toll. Some people continued to express interest in the project, but felt the June 1 deadline was too pressing. Others, because of impending changes in employment or superintendencies, found themselves unable to continue as planned. By the first of June, however, six persons had completed data gathering and submitted it to the coordinator for collating.



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One hundred twenty underachievers were identified in six different school systems across the country. Data on 116 of these were collected and included: age, sex, IQ, reading level, degree of underachievement, school absences, size of family, parents' educational level, physical condition, number of schools attended from first to eighth grade, number of times retarded, teachers' estimate of their motivation toward school, an estimate of their self concept, and results indicating the extent to which they were "test anxious."

Since these data are currently being tabulated and only tentative conclusions are available, a more complete report will be issued later. At the present time, however, it looks as though the following conclusions may be warranted: underachievers tend to have IQ's considerably above normal; they generally are "middle" children, having both older

and younger siblings; they have attended several different schools, usually at least three or four, by the time they are in the eighth grade; they apparently see themselves as being impatient, honest, and friendly, but not as popular, intelligent, dependable, unkind, or unhappy; their parents have finished about eleven years of schooling; they have not been held back in their school work by non-promotion; many are chronic absentees.

As a result of this project a meeting was held in Washington, D. C., late in June regarding the possibility of applying for a U. S. Office of Education contract to extend the study. A member of the ASCD staff, the U. S. Office of Education, the coordinator of the project, and a research director from one of the participating school districts were involved. Plans are presently under way to request such funds.

This research project is a study of achievement. People who are concerned about educational problems can, with encouragement and assistance, carry out significant and meaningful explorations into important problems in their own schools. Interested curriculum people can conceptualize and conduct worthwhile research if they are aided and stimulated by competent professional leadership.

If involvement in research is one way to facilitate the implementation of research results into school practice, this project would seem to indicate that finding ways and means of focusing various kinds of energies on a common problem is important. For the group conducting this study, the Fourth ASCD Research Institute accomplished this very well.

—JACK R. FRYMIER is associate professor of education, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Auburn.

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