CHAPTER 5

Helping Underachievers: Whole-Class Strategies

While I was working out at the gym, the man next to me said he used to be a teacher. After some soul searching, he had decided he needed a less stressful job, so he became an air traffic controller. This true story comes as no surprise to me, and I’m sure it wouldn’t surprise most educators. Helping students achieve is a complex, difficult job.

We can divide the student body into two groups. The first group is the successful students—those whose temperaments and backgrounds make school their cup of tea. Nothing out of the ordinary needs to be done for these children. The second group is the underachievers. They may underachieve in all areas or in a particular area, but they have one thing in common: They do inferior work in school.

The problem of underachievement is very serious. Natale (1995) estimates that 40 to 60 percent of students are underachievers. Greene (1986) places the number of underachievers at as many as half of the student body. These students aren’t living up to their potential. Because of their large numbers, it makes sense for teachers to take a group approach to fostering self-motivation. In this chapter, I will present ways to reduce these intolerable numbers, using strategies aimed at the entire class.
William Glasser (1986) maintains that children are doing the best they can, at any given moment, to satisfy one or more of their basic needs. When you understand this and see how totally ineffective many children are at satisfying their needs, you may be more likely to feel sorry for—rather than angry at—these unfortunate kids.

Realizing that the child is doing her best empowers teachers and administrators. If educators assume that a child is at fault for her lack of achievement (she is lazy, for example), then there is nothing they can do. However, if the school professionals believe that a child is doing her best, then they can devise strategies that may not only help the child but also significantly increase their own control over the situation. The only hope the child has is for school professionals to be adept enough to bail her out of the painful situation that limits her options and diminishes her academic performance.

Every person wants to be a success, and the underachiever wants desperately to be part of the educational mainstream. The teacher, encouraged by enlightened administrators, must use techniques to help each and every reluctant learner succeed. Of course, teachers have an awesome burden, but they are the last line of defense for these children. Teachers, therefore, must be willing to change and make their classrooms more student-friendly.

After all, what is the main function of a teacher? Is it to teach only the kids who don’t need special help? I will never forget the following occurrence. It was my second year of teaching. I had two honors classes. One class was scheduled to be out on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. I assigned them the work for the week on Monday, and then I gave them a test on Friday. To my surprise, they did better than the honors class that showed up all week. These kids didn’t need me. It is the disaffected students who need...
help. The great teacher soothes their emotional wounds and lifts the burdens from their frail psyches.²

The Importance of Self-Concept

I believe that teachers and administrators sometimes use fear to coerce students. John Holt (1964, p. 92) asserts that “most children in school are scared most of the time, many of them very scared.” He says that students are “afraid of failure, afraid of being kept back, afraid of being called stupid, afraid of feeling themselves stupid” (p. 71). He asserts that fear destroys intelligence and makes smart kids act stupid. As an example, Holt cites students who write any old answer because they are afraid to take their time, analyze, and succeed.

School can have a devastating impact on the lives of students who are struggling with the learning process. For example, teachers, psychologists, and guidance counselors sometimes give students negative labels. They may tell parents that their children need remediation or must be left back. Students are “subjected to fifteen thousand negative statements during twelve years of schooling” (Reasoner, 1989). According to the Quest Foundation, students report a lowering of self-esteem from a high of 80 percent who feel good about themselves in kindergarten to only 12 percent who feel good about themselves six years later (Reasoner, 1989). These struggling students have multiple problems: the initial obstacle that derailed the learning process; powerful fears that inhibit learning; negative feelings about themselves; negative labels; and relentless reprimanding, nagging, and punishments.

² Some of the material in this chapter first appeared in my article “Teaching Techniques for the Underachieving Middle Level Student” in the March/April 1998 issue of Schools in the Middle (pp. 18–20, 45). For more information, contact the National Association for Secondary School Principals at 800-253-7746.
Brain research supports the importance of self-concept to learning. The brain receives 40,000 bits of data per second. It's hard to believe, but that is what Sousa (1995) maintains. The brain has a filtering device, the perceptual register, that blocks out unwanted or unimportant stimuli. If the child has a history of failure, "then the self-concept signals the perceptual register to block incoming data" (p. 20). The teacher is doomed to failure when she tries to teach information to a child who lacks confidence.

Let me illustrate how lack of confidence inhibits memory. My wife and I, along with some friends, went to a Holiday Inn for entertainment. But instead of being entertained, I discovered the importance of self-concept in learning. The master of ceremonies asked for volunteers, and as usual, I was the most willing. He gave each of us five words to sing as he sang a song. At the appropriate moment, each of us would chime in with our assigned lyrics. When he got to me, I couldn't remember the five words! I was near the end of the group, so the humiliation I felt was even more intense.

He told me the words again and started over. He went through the entire song, once again accepting the input of the four people ahead of me, and then he pointed to me. Again I forgot the five words. Needless to say, he and the audience found a lot of humor in the fact that this teacher couldn't remember five words. Of course, I can. I have an excellent memory. What I can't do is carry a tune. When I heard I had to sing those five words, I could not remember them. This effect was genuine and unconscious. At the moment it happened, I had no idea about the perceptual register and how I was being "protected." How many tens of thousands of children have similar experiences in school, with the same humiliating results?

Disterhaft and Gergen (cited in Project T.E.A.C.H., 1991) offer strong evidence that there is a relationship between self-concept and academic performance. Furthermore, it's a two-way relationship: children's self-concept has an impact on their academic achievement...
(Scheirer & Kraeg, cited in Project T.E.A.C.H., 1991), and their academic achievement affects their self-concept (Corno et al., cited in Project T.E.A.C.H., 1991). Children with a negative self-image lower their expectations for themselves to reduce their disappointment. Naturally, in the end, this results in less achievement. Disaffected learners are caught in a vicious cycle that makes them feel unworthy of success and saddles them with an attitude that limits their chances of overcoming this dilemma. If the teacher helps these children to succeed, then the negative dynamics are forever altered.

It comes as no surprise that research done by Downes (cited in Teaching Through Learning Channels, 1997, p. 22) found that “underachievers felt they had less control over their lives.” Teachers who don’t involve these children are setting them up for failure, as do teachers who constantly criticize them. Research shows that when students feel that their teacher disapproves, their diminished self-esteem may result in lower motivation, underachievement, and behavior problems (Silvernail, cited in Project T.E.A.C.H., 1991). Effective teachers look for opportunities to involve their disaffected students and give them abundant praise and encouragement, thereby raising their confidence.

Teachers can also help emotionally needy students gain a positive vision of themselves by involving other students in the positive feedback. The activity “What’s our talent?” is one way of doing this. “The teacher reads the book Frederick, by Leo Lionni, to the class. Frederick is a mouse who appears to be lazy, but makes important contributions to his family by his poetry. After the story, the class is asked to identify the special talent Frederick had. The teacher then brainstorms the ‘talent list’ with the whole group, listing all the different talents and skills children can have.” Then the students are paired up. The pair identifies at least one talent of their partner, and then they share the talents with the class (Foyle, Lyman, & Thies, 1991, p. 52).
Once a child develops a positive self-image, she can entertain hope for higher achievement (Greene, 1986). Then the student is on the way to success. She will be able to set goals, reach those goals, and gain some control over her life. A teacher’s intervention can have a powerful impact on an emotionally needy youngster.

Ways to Bolster Students’ Confidence

We know that when students lack confidence, their achievement is limited. Fortunately, a teacher can do a great deal to increase a child’s confidence. Making sure that a student does well on his tests is a good start, followed by getting the student involved in class, using descriptive praise, and upholding high expectations for all students. These strategies are explained in the following sections.

Using Tests to Create a Positive Mind-Set

I always made the first test so easy that it was “impossible” to fail. The main reason for the easy test was to convince psychologically borderline students that they could pass the class. I kept a tally on the blackboard, and I read off the grades. Virtually everyone in the class had a score of 90 or better. Thus, I had created a mind-set: This class is easy, and we all can do well. I also began the year with the most interesting course content and activities. Between the high grades and enjoyable classwork, I had a delighted group of well-behaved, engaged youngsters.

I made the second test slightly harder, but now I recorded the grades of 80 or better on the blackboard. The vast majority of students were included, and they loved it. They were riding high. The self-doubt of so many students receded into the darkness.

If the class was a success, my third test was of normal difficulty, but if the class was struggling, I continued, for a short period, to keep the tests in line with a high success rate. A teacher’s patience
early in the year will pay handsome dividends in June when virtually all of her students complete a successful year.

**Calling on Underachievers**

Another way to build confidence is to include all students in question-and-answer sessions. Make sure that they have a positive experience. In most classrooms, teachers tend to call on students who they think know the answer. Correct answers can make teachers feel good and provide good information for the class. However, this practice sends a negative message to the students who are not participating. These students conclude that “I have nothing to contribute” or “I’m not part of this class.” The irony is that underachievers, the children who most need to feel important, are most likely to be left out. Typical classroom discussions can further convince struggling students that the education process is not for them.

When I taught, I encouraged the at-risk students to take part in class. If they didn’t volunteer, I called on them. I made sure that they always had a good answer. While the class worked independently, I would go around the room and look at their notes or listen in on their small-group talk. Then I could make it a point to call on them. If I called on students and their answers were wrong, I would find something positive to say, such as “That’s a good start. Who can add to it?” The teacher should be able to find something positive in virtually all situations. Be creative. Saying just the right thing will be challenging, but it will result in rewarding experiences with appreciative children.

**Using Descriptive Praise**

The main idea behind encouraging a student to participate in class discussions is for her to feel important and to gain confidence. This goal can also be accomplished if you use descriptive praise when a student gives a good answer. As we saw in Chapter 4,
descriptive praise is when the teacher lists positives in the student's work so the student will then give himself positive feedback. The following story illustrates the process.

Teaching 7th grade social studies, I once asked a child why adults were voting in September (it was the primary) when Election Day is the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. One 12-year-old boy enthusiastically volunteered what had to be the obvious answer: "They are new voters and they are practicing." A good descriptive response would be, "That's a very interesting answer. You know that 'practice makes perfect,' and it is very important for adults to make the right decision when they vote. I've never had an answer quite like yours before." The child is likely to say to himself, "I'm very creative" or "The teacher's pleased with me." See Figure 5.1 for more examples of descriptive praise.

In any exchange between a teacher and emotionally needy children, the students should receive feedback that can boost their confidence and improve their chances of being a success. With descriptive praise, the teacher lists the positives, and the student arrives at the positive conclusion. Internal praise (self-praise) carries more weight than external praise (praise from the teacher). Disaffected students rarely have anything nice to say about their educational pursuits, so it is a welcome change each time a teacher creates this valuable experience.

The praise that underachievers receive is usually inferior. Ogden and Germinario (1988) maintain that students who are less able receive less praise than higher-achieving students, even when they have earned it. Moreover, studies indicate that classroom teachers tend to give more nonverbal support to children for whom they have high expectations: "Teachers smile more often, lean closer to these students, and nod approval more frequently" (Project T.E.A.C.H., 1991, p. 32). It is a sad irony that those students who need encouragement and praise the most get the least.
Figure 5.1
Descriptive Praise in the Classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To use descriptive praise, say this:</th>
<th>Not this:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>When commenting on a persuasive essay</strong></td>
<td>Nice paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your paper is easy to follow because you stuck to the outline, you used sound reasoning, and you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tied it all together in the end with references to your opening idea. Thanks for all the thought you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>put into this assignment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When coaching young children in writing the alphabet</strong></td>
<td>Good but needs work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See how your letter looks like the letter on the chart. You have copied the form very well.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When giving feedback about math assignments</strong></td>
<td>Shows improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You must have worked very hard on this assignment—that’s called perseverance. Your answers show</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you are getting on top of borrowing and carrying, a very important math skill.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communicating High Expectations

Ineffective teachers expect little from the lowest-level students, and this attitude shows up even when school resources are allocated. Cohen and Seaman (1997, pp. 564–568) discovered that “the better the students, the better the instructional environment. [There was] no special curricula, no additional technology, nothing to suggest that these neediest of youngsters were receiving special attention or additional funding.” Teachers identified as being the best “were not able to create classroom environments for the lowest track that were as positive as those they created for the gifted.” Most important, lower-track children have low expectations for themselves. Very few are able to overcome the system and rise to lofty educational heights.
Of course, low-level classes that are set up by a tracking program have a devastating effect on kids. (It appears that the only students who may benefit from tracking are the highest-level group.) Teachers expect very little from these kids. The teacher next door to me said we could give these kids the answers to the final exam in advance and they would still fail.

The Japanese have an entirely different approach. Instead of tracking, they view individual differences in the classroom as an asset. Furthermore, the Japanese believe that “tailoring instruction to specific students” prejudges what students are capable of learning (Stigler & Hiebert, 1998, p. 9).

Great teachers have a mantra: All of their students can learn and be successful. Does anyone doubt the link between the teacher’s expectations and the students’ achievement? I tried an experiment for 10 years. I had two low-level classes every year, and I told these students that I moved from one-third to one-half of them to Regents (average) classes every year. I told these students to expect to move up next year. Sure enough, every year, almost half of my low-level students moved up, and I never had one come back and tell me that he couldn’t do the work at the higher level.

A good way to communicate high expectations is to create a job description for the students in your class. Ogden and Germinario (1988, p. 15) suggest the following job description for K-3 (this is a partial list):

1. I come to school on time.
2. I come to school ready to learn.
3. I come to school with all my supplies.
4. I follow all classroom rules.
5. I am courteous to my teachers.
6. I am considerate of my classmates.
7. I do my best to complete all my class work.
In conclusion, all school professionals—principals and teachers—should develop higher expectations for underachieving students, for these higher expectations may result in higher achievement.

Confidence-Building Strategies in Action

The following story shows what can be done to raise student confidence and academic performance. I had a group of 8th graders who were largely lethargic learners, alienated from the educational process, with a history of low achievement. When I taught some of these adolescents in 7th grade, they hadn’t responded to my best motivational techniques. They were “hopeless.” But this time, in 8th grade, I was determined to build their confidence and convey the message that I expected all of them to succeed.

I made the first test so easy that anyone could pass it, and each test became incrementally more difficult. By the fifth-week evaluation report, they were all passing and had a vested interest in their success. They gained confidence, felt proud of their improvement from the previous year, and were happy with the way the class was going.

Over the course of the year, if a student failed only one or two tests, I was there to bail her out. For example, Lisa failed her fifth test with a 30. I asked her why she had failed. “I was nervous,” she said. “I knew it,” I told her. “You know the work, I can tell from your comments in class. I’m not counting this test!”

During that year, Lisa failed one other test, but I gave her extra credit, and as far as she was concerned, she was part of the marvelous mainstream. In the 7th grade, Lisa had appeared inert, but in this new, positive atmosphere, she would start discussions and ask provocative questions. This change in her self-concept filled me with gratitude and wonderment.

In the same class, Diane, a former uninterested nonlearner, said to a friend, “I can’t wait until Monday to find out my grade [on the test].” I told another student, Carmela, that she did well on her test.
"I always come through," she replied. I couldn't believe that these were the same students who had wasted my time the previous year. By the end of the year, everyone passed the course, and 17 of 21 students "officially" had no failures. Through confidence building and holding high expectations, we educators can take a significant step toward realizing the potential of these youngsters.

The good news is that the teacher can influence the confidence level of most students. The teacher determines what is success and what isn't. Descriptive praise helps bolster self-confidence. Involving all children in a positive classroom experience is especially helpful. Finally, high expectations set by the teacher can result in a rewarding experience for struggling children. The main point is that you can make confidence-building activities part of your regular classroom practice.

A child from a dysfunctional home will have many negative feelings. The master teacher uses the child's success on tests and classroom activities to help her see the vision of herself that the teacher sees. "Research shows that students respond with behaviors complementing and reinforcing teachers' expectations" (Combelleth et al. and Jussim, cited in Project T.E.A.C.H., 1991, p. 106). The teacher articulates the main theme—that the student is a worthwhile human being with positive qualities, such as being likable and capable. This upbeat feedback empowers the child and helps her begin to gain control over her destiny.

Each underachiever needs a steady stream of daily positive feedback in class. The approbation must come from real achievement. I valued student participation, and I encouraged the articulate underachievers to take part in class. I made sure all of their comments were a source of pride, and I used their remarks to fuel their self-esteem. A teacher who provides this kind of affirmation will see students marvel at their newly acquired achievement. Every building needs a foundation, and every underachieving student needs a firm basis on which to build his educational edifice.
Helping Students Retain Information

Ineffective teachers help to create underachievers by giving students negative feedback, using negative labels, and neglecting to build confidence. But that's not all. Some students do poorly in school because they have poor study skills, and this deficit goes unrecognized in the pressure to teach to content standards.

Let's take Marci, a 15-year-old with above-average intelligence. Marci studied as much as five hours a night, but she managed only average grades (mostly Cs). She had no learning disability and did not appear to have any emotional problems. What could be her problem? This constantly disappointed youngster lacked adequate study skills. Her inability to take notes, organize information, distinguish what was important from what wasn't, and budget her time neutralized her diligence and made her an ineffective student. Six months after going to a learning center and improving her study skills, this delighted student received all Bs and an A on her report card (Greene, 1986).

Students who are deficient in skills for remembering information, organizing information, taking notes, and strategic planning can be helped. These struggling students can learn how to turn effort into success by acquiring the tools necessary to get the job done. Most schools help with some of these study skills, so I'm going to address only the one skill where I believe schools are most often delinquent—helping children retain information.

How can you tell a good student from a poor student? A poor student forgets the information immediately. A good student waits until after the test and then forgets the information. This is an old joke, but it has some truth to it. The purpose of this section is to help teachers convert an underachiever into a student who can remember information not only for the test but also beyond.

There are two main ways that teachers can help children retain information that they are exposed to in the classroom. These two
strategies are (1) to add meaning to schoolwork, and (2) to use the class period in the most effective way. The teacher can also improve retention by packaging information in an engaging way.

First, let's review some basic concepts about memory. There are two kinds of memory: short-term and long-term. The short-term memory can handle only a limited amount of information. The student's goal is to transfer what she learns from short-term memory into permanent storage (long-term memory). The two key factors in storing information permanently are whether the material makes sense to the student and how relevant it is to the student's life. Most teachers work hard at helping a student to understand the content. This is good because without understanding, there would be no long-term storage. However, it is just as important for teachers to provide personal meaning (relevance), for without it, an underachieving student is not likely to retain the information.

Relevance can be introduced by relating schoolwork to the students' interests, setting aside time in class for rehearsal (thinking about the material), relating the content to personal experiences, and using previously learned material to help with processing new data.

One of the best ways to establish relevance is to relate the content to the students' interests. Making a connection between the new learning and students' interests fosters long-term retention and boosts motivation. (To find out students' interests, a teacher can conduct an interest inventory during the first week of school.)

Myrna taught 2nd grade in Maryland. She told me a story about how she used a hyperactive student's interests to get him to sit still and concentrate. Because he loved sports, she gave him a book about sports to read over the summer vacation. To her surprise, he finished the book in three weeks, and he gave her a 30-minute dissertation on its content. (Myrna lived only a few blocks away from her student.) Before the summer ended, he had finished three more books on sports, and his mother got a real summer vacation.
We all know the amazing rate that students forget information “learned” in class. This rate can be reduced if a teacher sets aside time in class for children to think about the material. Does it make sense? Does it have meaning? The teacher can ask a question such as “What are three changes in American life caused by the Vietnam War?” While students are writing down their answers, the teacher can see whether they understand the content and whether it has meaning for them. By setting aside time at the beginning, middle, or end of the lesson, a teacher can encourage students to think about what they are learning and possibly improve their retention in the process (Sousa, 1995).

Students who can make connections between the subject matter and their own experiences tend to be successful learners. However, if students are unable to connect the new content with personal experiences, the teacher can help by connecting the new learning with related learning already completed. (Positive transfer is a cognitive process that occurs when students plumb their long-term memory to retrieve information or a skill that is relevant to the new information that’s being taught.)

Making the Best Use of the Class Period

Another way to help students retain information is to use the class period wisely. Research reported by Sousa (1995) indicates that children learn the most at the beginning of the period (called Prime Time I) and the second most at the end of the period (called Prime Time II). In between is “down time” when students are less receptive to new information. In a 20-minute lesson, you have 18 minutes of prime time (I and II) and two minutes of down time. In a 40-minute lesson, you have 30 minutes of prime time and 10 minutes of down time. The longer the class period, the more down time.

Prime Time I should be used to teach new information. Do not do clerical procedures during this time. Make the most of prime time
because the students are most receptive then. Prime Time II at the end of the period is an excellent time for rehearsal. The students can make sense out of new information and assess meaning. Down time calls for a change of activity. Some sort of rehearsal might also be included. Jim McCabe, a middle school teacher in Lynbrook, Long Island, uses the prime time method. He attests that his pupils do indeed have greater retention than they did under the old system.

**Packaging the Content**

How a teacher presents content and skills is also important to retention. When it comes to appealing to children, style is as important as substance. A teacher can get students, both achievers and underachievers, to do almost anything she wants, if she packages instruction in an appealing way.

There are many techniques that a teacher can use to make schoolwork appealing. For example, when I felt a full-period discussion was the best way to delve into a topic, I would write three or four essay titles on the board relating to the topic. I told the students that those essays were their classwork for the period. Then I would say, “However, before you start writing, I want to have a few minutes of discussion to get your minds working.” Needless to say, no class ever got to the essays. The creative nature of children to “beat the system” should never be underestimated. When the period ended, I was pleased with the intelligent discussion, and the students were enormously satisfied with themselves for avoiding the written work. It was a win-win situation.

I used a contest to help the students prepare for the midterm and final exams. First, the students would fill in their review sheets. When these were complete and the students had studied them, I would set aside five minutes at the end of class to play the Ciaccio 500. My five classes would compete. I asked questions from the review sheet, and the students received 10 miles for each correct
answer. The class with the most miles won. What made it so much fun were the cards that I would draw. Some cards were favorable, such as “You had a good night’s sleep” (gain 20 miles). Then there were nasty cards that said things like “Your steering wheel came off in your hand” (lose 30 miles). I drew six cards from the deck in the five-minute session, one at the beginning of the contest and one each minute. That meant that the final card was drawn when the bell rang. The final card often decided the outcome, making the end of each contest very exciting. If a class got a huge early lead, I would call on students and ignore volunteers. By pacing the class, therefore, it was possible that going into the final minute, it would be close. The students had fun, and their retention was bolstered in the process.

Don, a social studies teacher on Long Island, New York, knew how to appeal to his at-risk students. He told the students that if they achieved a B average or better in their elective (economics), they would not have to take the final. In 12 years, only three students took the final.

If you want students to perform in a certain way, it is wise to give them an attractive reason for doing so. Being creative makes the job easier and more fun for the teacher, and more successful for the students. For some reluctant learners, packaging the content in a desirable way may be all that is needed to divert them from their self-defeating ways.

Understanding Individual Differences

Mary made annoying sounds during my 7th grade social studies class. She used every sneaky trick in the book to disrupt the class. Unfortunately, she was a master at it, and I couldn’t catch her. I tried many positive techniques but to no avail. After the school year ended, I realized why I didn’t succeed with Mary. This child was an underachiever who needed my help, but I never gave it. I was too
busy with the many behavior problems in the class to worry about her underachievement. This was a costly error. When educators take a “one-size-fits-all” approach to education, too many children fall through the cracks. If I had paid attention to Mary’s academic needs, I might have had more success with her. Improving achievement is the best first step toward altering negative behavior.

If a child comes to school motivated and focused, then he has a good chance for success. If, however, he comes to school with problems—if he is socially backward, unmotivated, lacking in confidence, immature, unable to concentrate, or has emotional problems—then he could be in trouble. A child can come to school with all kinds of personal “baggage” that can inhibit the learning process.

In earlier chapters, we have seen how students who can’t learn like others start to resist the learning process and exhibit frustration, anger, and perhaps aggressive behavior. Greene (1986, p. 85) maintains that when children don’t succeed, they are likely to experience “the debilitating effects of frustration—stress, apprehension, insecurity, demoralization, fear, ambivalence, poor self-esteem, and poor self-confidence.” Some of these youngsters may be trapped in a vicious cycle that is self-defeating and academically destructive.

Many capable students are thrown off course because not enough attention is paid to their individual characteristics. Perhaps a child has difficulty processing information, or his temperament is not in sync with typical schoolwork. Or perhaps a child’s talents and interests don’t align with the limited intellectual areas that the school considers important and valuable. Or the child doesn’t have the cultural background to understand the lesson.

It seems self-evident that a child’s learning style, personality, talents, and cultural background must all be considered. The skillful teacher personalizes instruction within a group context. Excellent administrators encourage their teachers to cover all these bases, thereby avoiding the drawbacks of the one-size-fits-all approach.
Learning Styles

The teacher presented a terrific lesson. It was hands-on and enjoyable. Will all children learn the lesson? Probably not! Some teachers assume that if the information is presented in a clear and entertaining way, it is a sure bet; but we know that there are no sure bets. The obstacle could be the child’s learning style. John Holt (1983, Foreword) talks about children having “a style of learning that fits their condition, and which they use naturally and well, until we train them out of it.”

Rita Dunn, an expert on learning styles, maintains that students aren’t educated properly unless individual differences (learning styles) are taken into account. She asserts that “most teachers know what to teach but don’t realize that they can’t possibly know how to teach it without first identifying how their children learn (styles). Most children do not learn through traditional methods—lectures, readings, or discussions” (1999, p. 50). According to Dunn, learning styles vary along five dimensions: environmental, emotional, sociological, physiological, and cognitive processing preferences.

As Dunn explains, students react to their environment according to their individual preferences for noise or silence, bright or soft lighting, warm or cool temperatures, and formal or informal seating. Emotional factors include motivation, persistence (short or long working intervals), responsibility levels, and “preference for structure versus options.” Sociological preferences include working with peers, alone, with an adult, or in a variety of ways as opposed to a single routine. The physiological preferences are “perceptual strengths (auditory, visual, tactual and/or kinesthetic modalities), time-of-day energy highs and lows, intake (snacking or sipping while concentrating), and/or mobility needs” (pp. 50–53). Dunn completes the list with cognitive processing of information—a student’s style may be global or analytical, concrete or abstract.
Students who are auditory learners do a good job of processing information that they hear. Visual learners like to see information in writing. If the material is presented visually, they are more likely to remember it. Tactile learners prefer hands-on manipulation of the material to be learned. Because touching objects tends to "cement information into memory" for these students, flash cards are a good tool to use with them (Walden, 1999, p. 27). A kinesthetic learner prefers whole-body movements and classwork that requires physical activity. These children may struggle with reading, because it is usually taught in a visual-auditory modality (Carbo, cited in Teaching Through Learning Channels, 1997).

In general, studies have indicated that "most people learn best through a particular sensory/perceptual channel—kinesthetic, tactual, auditory, and/or visual" (Allen & Butler et al., cited in Teaching Through Learning Channels, 1997, p. 89). When teachers rotate their instructional strategies to cover all modalities, children respond with learning gains, enhanced self-concepts, improvements in their attitude toward teachers, and better attendance.

However, McCurry (cited in Teaching Through Learning Channels, 1997, p. 90) maintains that "most teachers rely almost exclusively upon print and aural modes of presentation." This habit is a problem because students who underachieve tend to have poor auditory memory (Shaughnessy, 1998). Many underachievers prefer tactile and kinesthetic approaches to learning. Moreover, they are often highly peer motivated, have a short attention span, and are repelled by routine classwork. Because there is a biological foundation for learning styles, teachers must adapt to the varied learning styles of students if they want to be effective.

A teacher tends to teach according to his own learning style, so he should be aware of his own preferences. When a teacher's learning style matches a student's learning style, the potential for greater learning exists. This factor could explain why two students in the
same class may have diametrically opposed opinions about the effectiveness of the teacher. One has a learning-style match with the teacher and the other hasn’t.

One way teachers can discover the learning styles of their students is by giving them the Kaleidoscope Profile developed by Performance Learning Systems. This inventory includes multisensory learning styles, temperaments, and the cognitive processing of information. It is color-coded, and children may find it appealing. Shaughnessy (1998) maintains that teachers must use a measuring device to identify learning styles. (His article offers five choices.)

Using technology can help students learn according to their individual styles. Caudill (1988, p. 11) suggests that “it is preferable to include multiple modalities within each lesson, and technology can help us do that.” For example, elementary school pupils can use software programs that provide a multimedia encyclopedia of mammals. With the on-screen video, the children can see and hear the mammals as they read about them.

Carl Wright, a social studies teacher at Tappan Zee High School in the South Orangetown Central School District, New York, summed it up perfectly when he said, “You have to use a variety of methods and approaches. It is imperative that the instructor adapt his methods to those that best fit the student.” A teacher can make a big contribution to students’ lives by helping them understand how they learn best and by establishing a classroom environment where all children have an equal chance to succeed, regardless of their learning style.

**Cognitive Processing**

Students also vary in how they process information. A child with a *concrete* preference prefers pictures, tastes, touch, sounds, and movement. But if words, numbers, and other symbols are
preferred, then the child has an *abstract* preference (Kimmell, 1999). For example, if a teacher shows a picture of a peach, he is appealing to the concrete learners; but if he uses the word *peach*, then he is appealing to learners with an abstract preference. Unfortunately, many children come to school preferring to be taught in a concrete way but end up experiencing only abstractions (symbols such as words and numbers) instead.

According to Sharon Kimmell (1999), global learners make up 30 percent of the school population. Global learners are interested in the big picture—concepts and ideas rather than facts and details. They tend to prefer a deductive approach to learning. They are concerned with relationships and patterns. For these students, a visual approach to learning is more useful than a verbal approach (Sousa, 1995). It also helps to teach these students concepts from an intuitive standpoint. For example, when teaching the American Revolution, ask open-ended questions like “What would have happened if George Washington had never been born? Would the colonies have won the Revolutionary War without him?” Global learners tend to prefer ambient sound rather than silence, soft rather than bright lighting, and informal seating arrangements. They like to eat and drink when learning, and they prefer short, intense learning intervals (Gremli, 1996).

Global learners benefit from opportunities for experimentation, artistic expression, and making maps of knowledge. These students need to see the final product. For example, Kevin, a global learner, had a history of behavior problems. He was impatient and often in trouble. His teacher could always count on him to ask for a repeat of instructions. Sharon Kimmell, Kevin’s 4th grade teacher, had been told by other teachers that she would have trouble with him—but she never did. Sharon made sure Kevin saw where the lesson was headed and understood the final product. The child was too busy improving his performance to create havoc in her classroom.
Sequential learners, by contrast, prefer a step-by-step approach. They use details and facts to build general concepts (Gross, 1991). Sequential learners prefer an inductive approach to learning. They have an affinity for speech, analysis, and sequence (Sousa, 1995). These children produce logical ideas, prefer outlining to summarizing, and take a verbal approach to learning.

Does it really matter? According to Dunn (1999, pp. 50–53), "A series of studies convinced us that globals taught globally and analytically (sequential learners) taught analytically achieved statistically better than when either was mismatched." However, most classroom instruction addresses abstract or sequential functions almost exclusively (Teaching Through Learning Channels, 1997). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that "potential high school dropouts are disproportionately global in their orientation" (Gilpatrick, cited in Teaching Through Learning Channels, 1997, p. 189).

Teachers and textbooks tend to be sequential rather than global and more abstract than concrete. Teachers must be sure when choosing instructional approaches that cognitive-processing preferences are taken into account.

In conclusion, children come to school needing concrete experiences, with many preferring to process information globally. Unfortunately, in most schools, students are greeted by an analytic teacher using an abstract textbook and teaching in a step-by-step, sequential way. The skilled teacher can take a giant step toward helping struggling students by using multiple modalities and teaching to varied cognitive-processing preferences.

Multiple Intelligences

Another example of the one-size-fits-all approach is the use of limited intelligence measures to determine who is "smart" in school. Howard Gardner has devised a well-known theory that there are at least eight intelligences. They are logical/mathematical,
verbal/linguistic, visual/spatial, musical/rhythmic, naturalist, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and bodily/kinesthetic.

IQ tests and most schoolwork are based on only two of these intelligences, logical/mathematical and verbal/linguistic. Children who are nonlearners might have substantial ability, but not in the narrow areas reflected on traditional schoolwork. Verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical intelligences form the heart of the four major subjects in secondary school (English, science, social studies, and math) and the essence of schoolwork, in general, from kindergarten to 12th grade.

Within this context, can teachers help students develop all of their intelligences? If teachers think creatively, it can be done. For example, to exercise students' verbal/linguistic abilities, a math teacher could assign a series of story problems, or a science teacher could have students write a humorous story using science vocabulary and formulas. To exercise students' logical/mathematical abilities, a history teacher could challenge his students to find examples of history repeating itself, or a math teacher could ask students to find unknown quantities in a problem (Azar, 1999).

To appeal to students' musical/rhythmic intelligence, teachers can "re-write song lyrics to teach concepts, encourage students to add music to plays, create musical mnemonics, teach history through music of the period, and have students learn music and folk dancing from other countries" (Boyles & Contadino, 1997, p. 42). To appeal to students' visual/spatial intelligence, a global studies and geography teacher could have his students draw maps of the world from their visual memory, while a physical education teacher could use a series of spatial games such as horseshoe or ring toss (Azar, 1999). To appeal to students' bodily/kinesthetic intelligence, a social studies or English teacher could offer acting and role-playing opportunities (Boyles & Contadino, 1997).
To promote the naturalist intelligence, teachers can use activities such as "nature collection, science experiments, study of living things and habitats, solutions to environmental concerns, and the use of natural resources" (Chapman, 1993, p. 159). A language arts teacher could have students do creative story writing using animal characters and their characteristics, while a math teacher could have his students perform calculation problems based on processes in nature (Azar, 1999).

To promote students' intrapersonal intelligence (awareness of their own feelings), teachers can use activities such as "goal setting, journals, independent learning time, reflection time, imagery experiences, and self-discovery" (Chapman, 1993, p. 176). A science teacher could assign "individual, self-directed projects," or an English teacher could "involve the students in journal writing and other forms of reflection" (Boyles & Contadino, 1997, p. 40). To promote students' interpersonal intelligence (the ability to understand and relate well to others), teachers can use cooperative learning—an excellent way to develop interpersonal skills.

Learning problems develop when the four major subjects in school rely mainly on only two intelligences. If children are not logical/mathematical or verbal/linguistic, they are unlikely to do well in school, in spite of the fact that they may be talented in the other intelligences.

The situation becomes even more complicated because teachers tend to teach according to their own strengths. This is a natural phenomenon, and many teachers are probably not even aware of it. For example, if teachers are logical/mathematical, as most math teachers are, their teaching methods will be in sync with children who are basically logical/mathematical. The rest of the children may struggle to varying degrees.

Teaching to multiple intelligences benefits all students but is especially valuable if you want to help underachievers. Addressing
Variations in Personality and Temperament

Besides honoring learning styles, cognitive-processing preferences, and multiple intelligences, teachers can expand their understanding of temperament and its effect on motivation and learning. Different students have different temperaments, and varied classroom strategies can address these personality characteristics. (Temperament is a biological aspect of a student's personality.) The quality of the teacher's school year depends to a large degree on the way he and his students interact. Therefore, understanding different personality types makes the challenge of developing meaningful relationships with students more manageable.

David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates (1984) have developed four personality types to describe students' temperaments. They use letters such as NT, SJ, SP, and NF to describe the four personality types. Other writers, such as Horton and Chandler, use a color code—green, gold, orange, and blue—to categorize the same four temperaments.

Children who fall in the "green" category (also called NT) tend to be thinkers—cool and detached, analytical and logical. These students learn best when they are "developing theories and concepts, and [they prefer] strategies that promote discovery and experimentation" (Horton & Oakland, 1997, pp. 131–141). These
students, who make up 10 percent of the school population, “reflect on the mysteries of life, solve problems, . . . investigate and question sources of authority, enjoy learning what interests them, prefer working alone, and insatiably pursue their search for knowledge” (Chandler et al., 1997, p. 27). Keirsey and Bates (1984, p. 48) say that these students want power, which they acquire by gaining control and understanding of nature. NT children “hunger for competency”; he or she will act like “a little scientist.” Because they are in a narrow minority, they feel different from other children. NT students need a lot of positive feedback and help with their social skills (Keirsey & Bates, 1984, p. 125).

Most teachers like “gold” children (also called SJ) because they are as good as gold. These children make up 30 percent of the student population. They follow the rules, are responsible and well prepared, turn in homework on time, and love “a structured, organized, and controlled environment” (Chandler et al., 1997, p. 27). The SJ children are eager to work. Keirsey and Bates (1984) maintain that SJ children are usually obedient, take interest in school clubs, and value report cards. These children have the easiest time adjusting to school because their temperament fits the traditional school system.

Students who find school almost intolerable are “orange” (SP children). These students are impulsive and spontaneous, and they love competition. They detest authority and find it difficult to follow school rules (National Education Association [NEA], 1999). It frustrates these children to sit still in class, face the front, get in line, and so on. Their desire for fun and freedom makes traditional school life unbearable. These students like games, contests, and especially movement (Keirsey & Bates, 1984). The best way to teach SP children is “through strategies that highlight variety, action, and entertainment” (Horton & Oakland, 1997, pp. 131–141). Classroom procedures that increase their fun, freedom, and power are
helpful to these kids. “Quiet, solitary learning activities are best interspersed with opportunities for the child to be active in some area of personal interest” (Keirsey & Bates, 1984, p. 109). According to Chandler and colleagues (1997), about 30 percent of students fall in this group, and they are overrepresented in at-risk programs.

Students who are “enthusiastic and warm, flexible and nurturing” fall into the “blue” category, or NF kids (NEA, 1999). These students make up 30 percent of the student population. They relate well to other people, so group activities, such as cooperative learning and working in teams, are favorable learning activities for them. NF children seek identity, hunger for positive recognition, prefer cooperation instead of competition, are repelled by sarcasm, like working individually and in small groups, and are involved with their own feelings and those of others. These students learn best when they can make a connection “to their personal lives and the lives of those important to them” (Horton & Oakland, 1997, pp. 131–141).

The best way to determine children’s temperaments is by observation or by taking an inventory. Teachers should find out in which category their students fall—but I suspect most teachers already know. From my experience, I’ve found that most teachers are themselves SJ (gold) or NF (blue). The SJ teacher values rules and traditional authority. The NF teacher values the students and spends a great deal of time trying to help them. Certainly, an SJ teacher is likely to have a problem with an SP kid. However, if the teacher is aware of this clash of temperaments, he can make adjustments to ensure that no conflict occurs. After all, the teacher is the adult and has more room to be flexible.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if schools would address students’ varied learning styles and temperaments? Some schools are trying to do just that. A retired principal from Montgomery County, Maryland, told me that his elementary school (K–6) was divided into two
kinds of classes, “closed” for students who liked traditional schoolwork and “open” for pupils who were independent learners. The principal matched teachers’ temperaments with the type of class (closed or open) to increase the chances that everyone would function to the best of his or her ability. In the spring, the teachers would discuss the students and place them in the appropriate setting. Parents also gave input. This is certainly a radical idea—actually altering the structure and procedures of the school to fit the needs of the students.

Children can’t alter their temperaments, so the teacher should make adjustments. Understanding children’s personalities allows you to be a more effective teacher. You need to accept these different temperaments and make the most of them. A classroom rich in variety not only combats boredom but also creates a more level playing field. Our cherished democratic principles of fairness and equality will have a better chance to come to fruition.

Cultural Competence

Reuven Feuerstein, a cognitive psychologist from Israel, has created a fascinating approach to helping educationally needy children, called the Mediated Learning Experience (MLE). Feuerstein maintains that reluctant learners come to school with an inadequate background. They have the same educational experiences in school that other students have, but they are unable to fully understand them because their home life has not adequately prepared them. According to Feuerstein, “Cultural deprivation . . . is a universal phenomenon” (Manual Work Team of the Cognitive Research Program, 1996, Foreword).

In the United States, we are aware that children from low-income homes, whose parents have low levels of education or are victims of social discrimination, are more likely to come to school with a background that is less conducive to high academic
performance than other students' backgrounds. These students can be helped, and MLE makes an important contribution to understanding the nature of the problem and offers possible solutions as well.

According to Feuerstein's disciple, Meir Ben-Hur, one of the fundamental premises of MLE is that "the structure of the intellect can be transformed to enable one to learn better" (1998, p. 663). Ample research shows that the school, with proper intervention by the teacher, can correct cognitive deficiencies, transforming potential nonlearners into good students. Active learning can help bridge the gap. "Rather than using textbooks as the purveyor of curriculum content, we should be using a continuum of concepts that can be laid over real-life locations, events, and situations, thus providing sufficient input to overcome lack of prior experience with the content at hand" (Kovalik & Olsen, 1998, p. 35).

There are 10 parts to the Mediated Learning Experience. I'm going to discuss only one of them, intentionality. According to this concept, if a child cannot learn like the other students, then the teacher must be the mediator; that is, he must intervene on the part of the student. As a mediator, the teacher presents the information in a way that the student can comprehend. The teacher reveals to the student his interest in his educational success. Furthermore, "the teacher is ready to reframe something that is not understood, and takes a special interest in slow learners and passive students" (Manual Work Team of the Cognitive Research Program, 1996, p. 11). Too often, a teacher who has his hands full with behavior problems tends to ignore the quiet, passive child who is failing or underachieving.

As educators, we must always remember to keep an open mind about students' potential. Children may come to school with what we consider an inadequate background, but that doesn't mean they cannot learn. For example, the Educational Trust reports that "more..."
than 4,500 U.S. public elementary and secondary schools that serve mostly minority and poor students are among the top academic achievers in their states, often outperforming schools in wealthy communities" (Henry, 2001, p. D10). These children may have come to school with deprived backgrounds, but they were still capable of rising to the occasion.

A Better Way

All children want to succeed and be part of the marvelous mainstream, and an educator can do a lot to guide underachievers to success. Underachievers come to school with emotional and academic handicaps. They may be unable to fit their personalities, learning styles, and talents into the schools' concept of what is desirable. Every child is wired differently. Fortunately, a teacher's skillful intervention can help children overcome these obstacles.

The great educator enables children to learn in a way that is in sync with their personalities and learning styles. Instead of one-size-fits-all, you can make adjustments so that all students will have a reasonable chance for success. The master teacher—with the support of caring administrators—can connect with children in the way described in this poem by Edwin Markham:

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!