



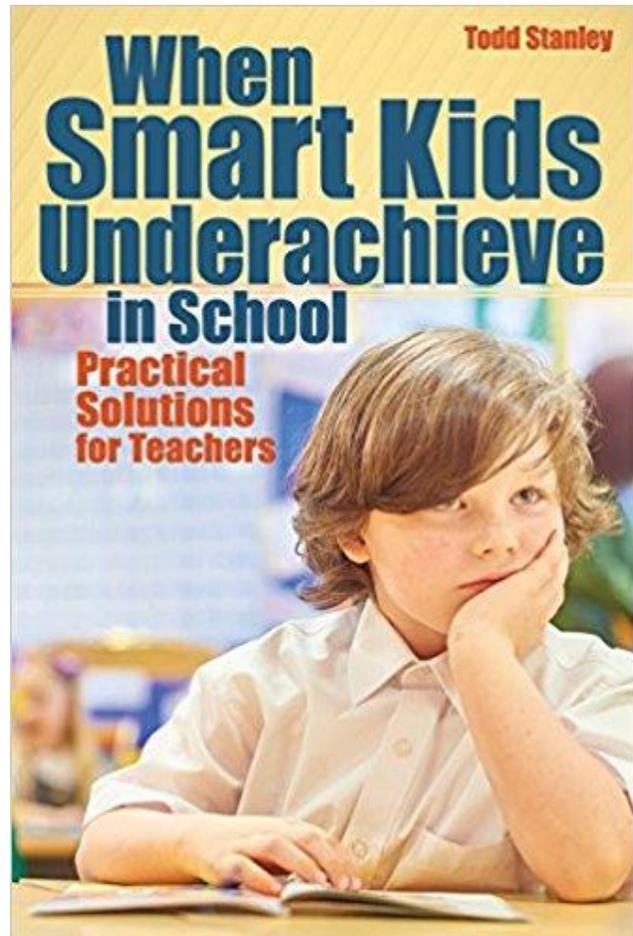
Stanley, T. (2018). *When smart kids underachieve in school: practical solutions for teachers*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

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One of the most common misconceptions about working with gifted children is that it is an “easy” job because all gifted children are good students. Anyone who has spent extensive time working with gifted students, or anyone who has worked with large numbers of these children, can most likely attest to the fact that it is not true. In fact, working with gifted students can be every bit as challenging as working with other populations of students, and in some instances, can be more so. One of the greatest challenges posed to teachers working with high ability learners is trying to ensure that their needs are met, and that they aren’t just getting by or getting A’s in school, but that they are truly meeting their potential. This can be a very difficult task, but it is one that Todd Stanley takes on in his book *When Smart Kids Underachieve in School: Practical Solutions for Teachers*. Stanley, a gifted services coordinator and former classroom teacher with extensive experience with gifted students, brings both knowledge and passion to the topic.



The book starts with an overview of underachievement among gifted students, how it can be difficult to identify, and why it is a serious concern. Stanley's basic definition of underachievement is a discrepancy between potential and actual achievement. Alarming statistics are presented, such as 18%-25% of students who drop out of high school are identified as gifted, the number of gifted students who are underachieving may be as high as 50%, and underachievers are less likely to attend college and to finish a four-year program and are more likely to have job or marriage instability. Stanley makes a clear case that something must be done to reverse these outcomes. The introduction also provides profiles of "smart kids" who struggled in school for one reason or another. These include familiar names, from Albert Einstein to Agatha Christie to Dylan Klebold, as well as broader categories into which underachievers may fall (e.g., the creative, the twice-exceptional, the underground). Stanley makes the case that the school system didn't always work well to help these highly capable individuals meet their potential, and in some instances, may have even hindered them. Once he has convinced readers that underachievement is a problem, Stanley then goes into the 10 most common reasons that gifted students might not be reaching their academic achievement potential. His list includes boredom, social-emotional needs, not having peers, home life, twice-exceptionality, lack of intrinsic motivation, lack of skills, lack of programming or trained teachers, not being challenged, and being too smart for their own good. Each of these challenges is addressed in a chapter of the book, where the author describes, explains, and then offers suggestions for overcoming these challenges.

A few passages in Stanley's book struck me as problematic. For example, in the first section, he tells the story of a former student who had incredibly high ability. Upon finding out this former student was joining the army, Stanley was clearly disappointed. Although the army is a "choice that many fine

women and men make" (p. 5) the author implies that this job is beneath him due to his intellectual abilities and skills. One can only imagine that mentality may rub a number of servicemen and women in the wrong way. (As a gifted student who was frequently questioned about my decision to become an elementary teacher, I'm often frustrated by the notion that certain professions aren't worthy of high-ability learners.) This type of thinking does not help to combat the idea that gifted education is elitist, which often makes meeting gifted students' needs an uphill battle.

Another problematic example is the use of Ken Griffey Jr. as the profile at the beginning of the chapter on the seventh cause, lack of skills. Stanley suggests that although Griffey was once the best player in baseball he would not make a good coach. The argument is that he had natural talent, and that "you cannot teach speed, you cannot learn strength, (and) you either have superb hand-eye coordination or you do not" (p. 121). While it is hard to argue that Griffey did not possess a lot of natural ability, it seems problematic to imply he was the best simply because he was born that way. Suggesting that he did not have to work exceptionally hard to become MVP or that coaches did not help him reach his peak performance also seems to contradict Stanley's overall message that gifted individuals need to be supported and challenged by teachers in order to reach their full potential. It's also not clear how this example is making a case for teaching students skills that they may be lacking, which is the focus of the chapter.

There are a few minor editorial issues with the book as well. The end of the book has a list of references and additional suggested readings and resources. However, some of the resources are not included on the list. It would be helpful to have all the resources compiled in one place. The book also lacks an index, which would be a useful tool for practitioners. Figure, a map that was originally color-coded, is black and white in the print book. Stanley's narrative of the map refers to the colors, which is confusing since

they are not present. A link was provided for the original source, but the online map doesn't quite match the book's map.

That Stanley has taken on such a large topic, and accomplishes it in 195 pages, indicates that this book is not a comprehensive guide for solving all problems that may face high-ability learners and their teachers. It is, however, a valuable starting place. First, it prompts those who work with high-ability learners to think critically about their students' achievement and whether or not their potentials are being met. By providing teachers with an overview of the main causes of underachievement, Stanley has given teachers a valuable tool for trying to find out why students might be underperforming. That is a clear first step when trying to decide how to intervene for these students. Although the solutions proposed are brief overviews, Stanley at least offers a starting point with suggested strategies, and he usually provides a recommendation for further reading directly pertaining to the identified issue or a particular strategy. He often shares concrete examples that help readers to better understand the strategies and his own experiences using the techniques, which speak to their feasibility and effectiveness. The strategies presented are applicable to educators across the spectrum, from elementary to high school, and are likely to resonate with parents and administrators.

Although billed in the subtitle as "practical solutions for teachers," there are a number of strategies posed that fall into the category of much easier said than done. They are suggestions that would require system-level changes, that would demand a lot of time and

logistical work from teachers, or that may be difficult or even impossible to implement due to constraints put on teachers by administrators, curriculum mandates, inflexible schedules, etc. However, with multiple solutions posed in each chapter, it is hard to argue that teachers cannot use the book to find some method of intervening that would make a positive impact on underachieving students. For many of the chapters, Stanley addresses the fact that some solutions may not be doable and presents alternatives that might be easier to accomplish within the constraints of an educational system. While these smaller-scale suggestions may not be as comprehensive and likely will not "solve" the problem of underachievement, they are still a positive step and will send to students the message that teachers and schools are trying to meet their needs.

There are many different potential causes for underachievement and the likelihood of a combination of contributing factors for each individual student can make addressing their needs a messy and complicated process. One thing that Stanley makes clear in just about every chapter of the book is that teachers have immense power to make a difference for students who would otherwise underachieve or even struggle to find success in school. That is both an empowering message and a somewhat daunting challenge. For those willing to take on the work, *When Smart Kids Underachieve in School* is a great resource to help teachers identify underachieving students and set them on the course for success.

About the Reviewer

Andrea Hayden is a National Board Certified elementary teacher with 17 years of teaching experience. She currently teaches fourth grade in a gifted program for Albany County School District #1 in Laramie, Wyoming. She is pursuing her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wyoming.



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