



Managing His Image: The Challenge Facing a Gifted Male

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Gabe was producing as little as possible in his middle school classes. Teachers reported this gifted young man was doing just enough to get by. Parents were also concerned with his lack of enthusiasm for school. He was a skateboarding enthusiast and daredevil whose interest in this sport encompassed his life. Gabe was 14 years old and lived in a small suburban community. Dressed in colorful skateboarder clothing, he was often seen on his skateboard, scaling the walls of the local shopping mall. Gabe was bright, handsome, personable, charismatic, and had a following of male friends and a constant circle of admiring middle school females who suffered "major crushes."

Mr. Johnson, Gabe's enrichment program teacher shared his opinion concerning Gabe's lack of progress. He had seen a side of Gabe others had not. Gabe had always been concerned with his image. Mr. Johnson had planned an exciting field trip to Washington D.C. The eighth grade class, including Gabe, had spent the year involved in fund-raising activities to cover student expenses. Two weeks before departure, Mr. Johnson became aware that a problem was emerging among the young men in the enrichment class. Several of the boys had quietly announced that Gabe had chosen not to participate in the field trip and they too would not be going. They claimed they were not interested in visiting Washington, explaining that it was simply "not a cool trip."

Mr. Johnson held a private conversation with Gabe and discovered that he suffered from severe motion sickness and simply could not tolerate the idea of a 15-hour long bus ride to the nation's capital. The possibility of being physically sick while in the company of his peers was totally unacceptable to this well-respected young man. Although he realized that his decision to withdraw from the trip was influencing his friends and he sympathized with Mr. Johnson, the popular "skateboard king" had an image to protect and chose not to travel to Washington.

Ben was faced with a different situation. This young man enjoyed alternative music and had changed his collared polo shirts, docksiders and khakis for oversized cargo pants, heavy boots, and sweatshirts. He was a champion backstroke swimmer for his inner-city high school swim team. He was known for his lively comical antics when he and his teammates were introduced at pep rallies. Ben was a gifted student who was underachieving in all subjects except creative writing. Ben's lack of enthusiasm for school had been a cause for parental concern for months. Anecdotal comments on recent report cards had read "not working up to potential." Teachers began to ask questions and the swim team coach was alerted. An academic awards assembly was to be held and Ben knew that he would be receiving an award for creative writing in front of an audience of fifteen hundred students. The young man who was ready to accept the adulation of the pep rally crowd, could not face the possibility of having to walk across the stage of his high school auditorium to be recognized as the creative writing award recipient. Instead, he chose to skip the awards assembly, and spent the time hiding in the men's locker room.

In both cases, the behaviors of these bright young men would be attributed in part to their desire to maintain an image. Gifted males concerned with image management issues may become academic underachievers if their adolescent culture does not value academic success (Hebert, 2001; Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Bright young men like Gabe and Ben may do poorly in school, not simply because they aren't motivated to study, but because they are intent on maintaining their status in a peer group that regards academic achievement as uncool. Maintaining their image may require decisions that are detrimental to long term adjustment. Gifted males may be forced to mask their true identities to survive in a macho teenage male culture (Pollack, 2000).

The masculine mystique and value system comprise a set of beliefs that defines what our society regards as masculine. These values are learned early in childhood and may be based on rigid gender role beliefs. One feature of this masculine mystique is the belief that vulnerability, weakness and academic success in school are signs of femininity to be avoided at all costs (O'Neil, 1981). For young men like Gabe and Ben, being in control is often essential to proving one's masculinity, even if it means missing out on an exciting class trip or recognition at an academic awards assembly.



How can we help?

There are a number of strategies that educators, counselors, or parents may want to consider implementing to change the under-achieving behaviors in gifted boys due to issues of image. The role of image could easily become a topic for a discussion group with gifted males. With the help of an empathic teacher, young men may be able to provide each other with support to cope with a peer group that does not value their intellectual abilities. Another strategy, the use of biographies of gifted men who faced this issue in school, may also be helpful to gifted teenagers. Teacher or counselor-guided classroom discussions centered on the biographies can provide gifted young men with new insights and strategies to deal with a macho culture that is unappreciative of their talents (Hebert, 1995). Exposing gifted teenage males to role models in a school setting may motivate them to assume a more appropriate image. Inviting successful men from the community as guest speakers on this topic may be helpful. Men who are achieving professionally may have suggestions for younger men who are troubled with the role of image. In addition, these successful professionals may serve as mentors to gifted males who may need the guidance and friendship of a caring adult role model. These adults can relate how they felt as bright adolescents and how they dealt with similar issues related to fitting into a macho culture. A creative teacher working with a counselor and parents may want to try several of these strategies to assist gifted males. With the help of caring adults, bright young men will begin to realize that the role of image need not be a challenge.

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