

# Underachiever? Twice Exceptional? Or Just Lazy?

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## **Reversing Underachievement**

Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D.  
Gifted Development Center

### **Characteristics of Underachievers from Whitmore's *Giftedness, Conflict & Underachievement*:**

- Perfectionistic
- Supersensitive
- Lacks social skills
- Socially isolated
- Has unrealistic self-expectations
- Is low in self-esteem
- Has psychomotor inefficiency
- Hyperactive
- Distractible
- Chronically inattentive
- Frustrated by the demands of the classroom
- Fails to complete assignments
- Excessively critical of self and others
- Rebellious against drill and excessive repetition
- Disparaging of the work they are required to do
- Become "an expert" in one area and dominate discussions with their expertise

These are also the characteristics of gifted children with learning disabilities. It is imperative to have a comprehensive assessment in order to detect hidden disabilities.

**Typical Characteristics of Underachievers:** Has a negative self concept; Distrusts others; Has feelings of inferiority; Tends to rationalize errors; Blames others for failure; Avoids responsibility; Socially immature for age; Lacks self-discipline; Does not focus on distant goals; Cannot delay gratification; Has difficulty accepting unpleasant realities; Treats assignments as if they will disappear if ignored; Has few strategies for academic success; Has difficulty being appropriately assertive; Withdraws from stressful situations; Desires immediate results.

### **Causes of Underachievement**

- Fear of failure
- Fear of success
- Fear of lack of acceptance by peers
- Undetected learning disabilities
- Lack of basic skills and study habits
- Inappropriate educational activities
- Lack of opportunity in the society
- Too high expectations of parents
- Too low expectations of parents
- No parental support for education
- Fear of overshadowing parent
- Passive-aggression toward parent
- Low frustration tolerance
- Lack of impulse control
- Lack of competitiveness

- Guilt for being advantaged intellectually
- Interests in activities other than school
- Cumulative deficits and belief in failure

### **Positive Attributes of Underachievers**

- Courageous
- Supersensitive
- Highly creative
- Strong sense of fairness
- Selectively competent
- Witty
- Can hold a great conversation
- Persuasive debating skills
- Vibrant imagination
- Social
- Street smart
- Absolutely endearing
- Intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated
- On own time schedule
- In a great mood during school vacations
- May show leadership ability
- Idealistic
- Passionate about interests
- Tremendous self-discipline for own agenda

### **Strategies for Teaching Underachieving Gifted Students**

- Early identification
- Individual diagnosis
- Creative interests and passions
- Parental support
- Intellectually challenging classes
- Teaching to the child's strengths
- Teaching to child's learning style

### **Interviewing Parents**

- Did the problem begin before school?
- Is the child difficult to deal with at home?
- Did the child have many ear infections?
- Is there a family history of learning issues?

### **Interviewing Students**

- What are your favorite subjects?
- What classes do you dislike? Why?
- What are your passions?
- What are your aspirations?
- What do you think would make it easier for you to succeed?

The number one complaint of underachieving students is **handwriting** ! What would happen if you let every underachieving student TYPE assignments???

### **Linda Emerick's Study** ***The Role of the Teacher***

- Cared for and sincerely liked the student as an individual
- Communicated as a peer
- Enthusiastic; knowledgeable of subject matter
- Directly involved students in the learning process
- Each student “believed a specific teacher was *the single most influential factor* in the reversal of the underachievement pattern.”

### ***The Role of the Program***

- Held high but realistic expectations
- Classes were intellectually challenging
- Advanced coursework
- Independent study

### ***The Role of the Parent***

- Maintained a positive attitude toward their child even in the face of academic failure
- Remained calm, consistent and objective
- Did not see underachievement as a permanent pattern
- Supported their child's interests
- Did not make participation in extra-curricular activities dependent on grades
- Placed responsibility for homework directly on their child
- Did not become *The Enforcer*

### ***Characteristics of the Students***

- Intelligent
- Creative
- Independent
- Perseverant
- Willing to take risks
- Intense love of a specific area

### ***References***

- Emerick, L. J. (1992). Academic underachievement among the gifted: Students' perceptions of factors that reverse the pattern. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 36, 140-146.
- Whitmore, J. R. (1980). *Giftedness, conflict, and underachievement*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

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The Gifted Development Center (GDC) has been a resource for parents of the gifted for over 32 years, serving 6,000 families from all over the world. Services include assessment and counseling of gifted individuals of all ages, the twice exceptional, visual-spatial learners, profoundly gifted, and gifted women. Parent consultations are available by phone or Skype on advocacy, parenting and self-discovery. GDC publishes *Advanced Development*, the only journal on adult giftedness.

# REVERSING UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Linda Emerick

All students had long-standing out-of-school creative interests.

Parents supported their children's interests.

Parents remained calm, consistent and objective, and placed responsibility for homework directly on their children.

Parents maintained a positive attitude toward them even in the face of academic failure. They did not perceive underachievement as a permanent pattern.

Students were intelligent, creative, independent, perseverant, willing to take risks, and all had an intense love for what they were doing.

Classes were intellectually challenging, had advanced course content, and permitted independent study.

Each student "believed a specific teacher was *the single most influential factor* in the reversal of the underachievement pattern."

Emerick, L. J. (1992). Academic underachievement among the gifted: Students' perceptions of factors that reverse the pattern. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 36, 140-146.

# **Strategies that Work for Underachievers**

Linda Silverman, Ph.D.  
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**Ask the student what he or she needs.**

**What are the student's strengths?**

**What are the student's interests?**

**How can these strengths and interests be used to help the student master other areas of learning?**

**Allow extra time for tests.**

**Wait longer between questions and accepting responses from students.**

**Be flexible about assignments.**

**Provide access to computers.**

**Provide access to tape-recorded books.**

**Mark only answers that are correct instead of wrong.**

**Have student experiment reading with different colored transparencies over the page.**

**Have an older student who has had difficulty learning**

**assist a younger student.**

**Break down long-term projects into less overwhelming segments.**

**Allow opportunities for movement.**

**Try larger print and more space between problems on a page.**

**Be flexible! Modify assignments so that the student can be successful.**

**Encourage the student to ask if uncertain.**

**Allow students to work in pairs with a buddy who has a similar learning style.**

Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist. She founded and directs the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development and its subsidiary, the Gifted Development Center. She also founded Visual-Spatial Resource and *Advanced Development Journal*. She has studied the psychology and education of the gifted since 1961 and has written over 300 articles, chapters and books, including *Counseling the Gifted and Talented*, *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner* and *Advanced Development: A Collection of Works on Gifted Adults*. The Gifted Development Center has served as an international resource center for gifted children and their families since 1979. Over 6,000 children have been assessed for giftedness, learning disabilities and visual-spatial learning style. Services are available for parents, including consultations about their own giftedness, parent advocacy, and parenting gifted children.

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# Help for the Hidden Handicapped

*Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D.*

Do you have a child who looks like he's been sentenced to a torture chamber whenever he's asked to write anything? You may not be raising/teaching an "obstinate, lazy underachiever"; instead, you may be looking at a gifted child with a thinly disguised learning disability. Here's a checklist to help you determine if this child needs further diagnosis. As you look over the list, imagine that this young person has just been given an assignment to write an essay and you are observing him in the process.

## Diagnostic Checklist

1. Is his writing posture awkward? (Does he resemble a scrunched up pretzel?)
2. Does he hold his pencil strangely?
3. Can you see the tension run through his hand, arm, face?
4. Does it take him much longer to write than anyone else his age?
5. Does he fatigue easily and want to quit?
6. Does he space his letters on the paper in an unusual way?
7. Does he form his letters oddly (e.g., starting letters at the top that others would start at the bottom)?
8. Does he mix upper and lower case letters?
9. Does he mix cursive and manuscript?
10. Are his cursive letters disconnected?
11. Does his lettering lack fluidity?
12. Does he prefer manuscript to cursive?
13. Does he reverse letters after age 7?
14. Is his handwriting illegible?
15. Is his spelling poor?
16. Does he avoid writing words he can't spell?
17. Does he leave off the ending of words?
18. Does he confuse singulars and plurals?
19. Does he mix up small words, like "the" and "they"?
20. Does he leave out soft sounds, like the "d" in gardener?
21. Is his grasp of phonics weak? (Is it difficult to decipher what he was trying to spell?)

## Assessment

If you have noticed most of these signs, you are probably looking at a child with a disability. The next step is a thorough, comprehensive diagnosis by a competent psychologist—preferably one who has some experience with gifted children with learning disabilities. A caveat is in order here. Giftedness and

disabilities can cancel each other out, making the child appear "average." High scores represent the child's giftedness and low scores his disabilities. Also some professionals do not realize the significance of large discrepancies between strengths and weaknesses when a child's lowest scores are still within the average range. A general rule of thumb is that a 15 point discrepancy between the Verbal and Performance score on the WISC-R is significant, as is a 7 point discrepancy between the highest subtest score and lowest subtest score (Sattler, 1982).

## Therapy

Diagnosis should be followed by therapy, if indicated. The following therapeutic interventions may prove helpful:

1. Children with depressed Performance scores might be seen by a behavioral optometrist to see if vision therapy would be recommended (Hellerstein, 1990).
2. Children with eye-hand coordination or motor speed problems may profit from sensory-motor integration therapy offered by an occupational therapist.
3. Children with auditory perception problems can be further assessed by an audiologist, using the Central Auditory Processing Battery.
4. Children with cyclic mood swings and lack of control could be checked by allergist for food allergies.
5. Children who are highly distractible can be seen by a specialist in attention deficit disorders.
6. If emotional difficulties surface or the child has suicidal ideation, consult a psychologist or play therapist.

## Educational Interventions

Modifications of the child's school program area also recommended. Some of the following suggestions should be implemented:

1. Write assignments on the board or on paper.
2. Use several modalities when presenting information: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, when possible.
3. Teach to the student's strengths.

4. Expose the student to abstract, complex concepts, even if he hasn't mastered the easy, sequential material.
5. AVOID TIMED TESTS! If they are absolutely necessary, let the student take them by himself competing with his own past record rather than in competition with others.
6. If the student has motor speed or processing speed difficulties, make sure this is documented by the school psychologist so that college board exams (SAT, ACT) can be arranged to be taken untimed.
7. Allow the student to use a keyboard for most assignments. When grading handwritten work, do not lower grades due to mechanical errors.
8. Let the student discover his own methods of problem solving. Do not force him to show his work.
9. Use a sight approach to reading rather than phonics. Use books rich in visual imagery.
10. Many of these students are "whole-part" learners, so give them the big picture before the details.
11. Engage a tutor to help the student learn visualization techniques (Freed, 1990).
12. Teach the student to compensate for his disability rather than trying to remediate it. For example, teach him to use a spell check program or a Bad Speller's Dictionary (Krevisky, 1985).
13. To improve handwriting, try calligraphy.
14. Use humor frequently.
15. Engage the student emotionally through encouragement.
16. Assure the student that he will get smarter as he gets older, because most gifted individuals with learning disabilities find fields where they can succeed.

For more detailed information on this topic and a longer list of suggestions, please see the article, "Invisible Gifts, Invisible Handicaps" (Silverman, 1989). Gifted children with learning disabilities do not have to fall through the cracks in the system. With proper detection and intervention, school can produce joy instead of defeat.

## References

Freed, J.N. (1990). Tutoring techniques for the gifted. Understanding Our Gifted, 2 (6), 1, 11-13.

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(NOTE: I used the "generic male" pronoun throughout the article because the majority of students I've seen who fit this description were male. My apologies to my feminist friends!)

*Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and Director of the Gifted Child Development Center in Denver, Colorado. She has 30 years of experience with the gifted and her doctorate is in the field of learning disabilities. One of the national services she provides is analysis of previous test results of gifted children with hidden learning disabilities.*

## Strategies for Twice-Exceptional Learners

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- Early detection and intervention, while the brain has a great deal of plasticity, enables the development of new pathways.
- New neural pathways are formed through practice.
- They remember what they see and forget what they hear, so *SHOW* them! A picture is worth a thousand words.
- If they consistently have accurate answers, but cannot show the steps to their conclusions, do not make them show their work.
- Use assistive technology.
- Tell them about “good days” and “bad days.”
- Each gifted child with learning disabilities needs an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) that takes into account both exceptionalities.
- They are *NOT* step-by-step learners, so give them The Big Picture first!
- Avoid timed tests.
- Teach to their strengths. Teach them to use their strengths to compensate for their weaknesses.
- Children who have difficulty with fine motor development should be taught keyboarding skills as early as possible.
- If they cannot master the keyboard within one dedicated year, use voice-activated software, such as *Dragon Naturally Speaking*.
- Give them copies of the assignments. Do **not** require them to copy them from the board. Children who have fine motor delays, processing speed deficits, or visual issues cannot copy from the board efficiently.
- Use visualization techniques in every subject, such as visualizing spelling words.
- The Barrington Stoke series for reluctant readers is excellent:  
[www.barringtonstoke.co.uk](http://www.barringtonstoke.co.uk)

- Twice exceptional children need to be taught at the level of their strengths, not their weaknesses. They need *ADVANCED WORK*, even if they have not mastered the easier work.
- **Compensation strategies**
  - ✚ Carrying a day planner
  - ✚ Making lists
  - ✚ Visualizing
  - ✚ Using a word processor with spell check
  - ✚ Having a quiet place at home to study
  - ✚ Tape recording lectures
  - ✚ Using earphones
  - ✚ Having a place to retreat when overstimulated
- They usually suffer from low self-esteem, so reassure them that they will get *SMARTER* as they get older.
- Be their cheerleader. Believe in them.

Genius does not occur *in spite of* disabilities—rather, it occurs *because of* disabilities. When they are adults, hopefully they can hire a support team with the skills they lack. Gifted children with learning disabilities who are seen as defective, in constant need of remediation, come to view themselves with shame and doubt. But when those closest to them honor their strengths and believe in their ability to fulfill their dreams, they are able to mobilize their will to succeed against all odds.

**With the right support, twice-exceptional individuals become some of our most creative, productive innovators—PEOPLE WHO CHANGE THE WORLD!**

## ***Teaching Techniques for Inattentive and Overactive Children\****

Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D.  
Gifted Development Center

Working effectively with highly active or inattentive children isn't easy, and with some children it is a matter of trial and error. Ask the child's parents what methods have been successful in the past. Has there been a beloved teacher or mentor who had a magic touch with the child? Seek guidance to increase your chances of success. Following are some general guidelines from the literature that may be helpful in your quest:

1. Provide highly stimulating work, along with structure, firm rules, clear expectations, and specific adaptations for AD/HD.
2. Give them opportunities for movement in the classroom. They can only sit for just so long. Honest. Let them sharpen a pencil, do an errand, go to a learning center, pace, or whatever, *every 15 minutes*.
3. Some children are able to sit for longer periods of time on a large ball that you can obtain from a back store or an occupational therapist. Or try different kinds of cushions.
4. Instead of reprimanding them each time they blurt out an answer, try complimenting them when they demonstrate some self-control. Remember that much of this behavior is not within their control.
5. Provide incentives for homework completion or on-task behavior. Maybe they can earn a special privilege by working hard at adapting to the rules in the classroom.
6. Try providing a more challenging activity or assignment and see if that helps. If it is too hard, they will give up in frustration, and if it is too easy or too repetitious, they will be unable to concentrate.
7. One-on-one attention really helps. Can an aide or volunteer assist the child? This is particularly necessary at the beginning of an assignment, as these children often are uncertain how to get started. They need guidance with organization and elaboration of ideas.
8. Remember that attention is variable, so expect inconsistency. An activity that is new and interesting one day may be unappealing the next day. They respond to variety, so be creative.
9. They usually have trouble stopping an activity they are engaged in and moving on to something else, so develop a signal (e.g., a tap on the shoulder) or assign a buddy to help them with transitions.
10. As most suffer from poor handwriting and racing thoughts, allow them to use a keyboard for written work. A typing tutorial program should be employed, such as Mavis Beacon, Mario Teaches Typing, etc.

11. Shorten writing assignments or allow them to demonstrate mastery in some other way.
12. Preferential seating is often necessary. Sit the child near you and give frequent eye contact to help maintain attention (as well as reduce disturbance of others).
13. Call on them as often as possible during class discussions. Interaction really keeps them focused, and waiting their turn is difficult.
14. Have a firm rule in your classroom that no teasing is allowed. These children are particularly vulnerable to ridicule by other students. A class discussion about individual differences helps set the tone for acceptance.
15. When behavior becomes problematic, ask the child to brainstorm with you some ways to resolve the difficulties. This will increase self-awareness and improve self-control.
16. Develop a good communication system between home and school, so that the child does not get too far behind in homework and the parents are informed on a regular basis about behavior at school. Thank goodness for email...
17. Have a place in the room where the child can retreat when overstimulated or unable to maintain control. This should be a quiet corner with headphones, and perhaps some relaxing music, puzzles, books, etc. This is *not* a time-out center that the child associates with punishment. Instead, it is a self-chosen retreat when needed.
18. A social skills group or “friendship group” can help the child learn skills such as taking turns, not standing too close, not dominating a discussion, finding out what others are interested in, etc. This experience can prevent social rejection.
19. If you have a Student Assistance Team or Care Team (a interdisciplinary group that meets to discuss children at risk) at your school, brainstorm other ways to accommodate the needs of this particular child and other highly active children in your school.

\*From *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner*. (2002). Denver: DeLeon Publishing. **Do not copy without permission from author.** Contact the Gifted Development Center, 1452 Marion Street, Denver, CO 80218, (303) 837-8378.

## A Teacher's Quest: Getting Non-writers to Write

By Linda C. Neumann

*This article first appeared in the Winter, 2005, issue of Gifted Education Communicator, published by the California Association for the Gifted*

A small group of children huddles together, waiting for the roll of the dice. "Sixteen!" one young man exclaims. "That means the troll is vulnerable to low temperatures. Good! My character uses his ice powers to freeze the troll's feet to the floor."

Another dice roll. "Eighteen," the game master announces. "Okay, the troll's feet freeze to the floor, but he still has his club and he swings it at your character."

What happens next? It depends on the next roll of the dice. "Six," says the game master. "The troll misses completely."

The game continues with players and game master rolling the dice to see what path the adventure will take.

### A Fourth "R" – RPGs

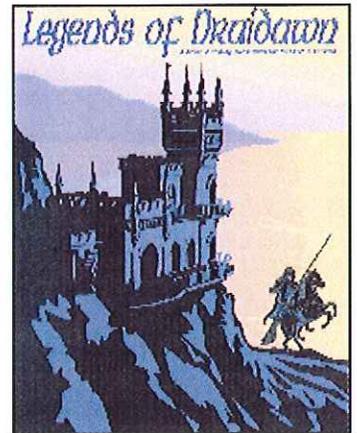
As some readers will recognize, what's happening here is a fantasy role-playing game (RPG). Adventuring will continue, possibly for hours. Each of the participants will play out their character with the GM (game master) deciding what twists and turns the game's storyline will take and enforcing the rules of the game.

RPG players tend to range in age from middle school through college (or even beyond) and many are male. They also tend to be bright and creative individuals with active imaginations.

The online encyclopedia Wikipedia describes fantasy role-playing games this way: *At their core, [role-playing games] are a form of interactive and collaborative storytelling. [They] engage the participants actively, allowing them to simultaneously be audience and author...[T]he players are writing the story together, as a team. At the end of a role-playing game session the events that transpired could be written into a book that would tell a story written by all of its participants.*

It's this storytelling aspect of role-playing that captured the imagination of educator Miriam Darnell, herself a former gamer. Darnell is a teacher at Brideun, a school for twice-exceptional children in Lafayette, Colorado. There, she regularly encounters students with plenty of creativity but a strong aversion to writing. She wondered if her childhood passion, role-playing, could be the key to getting both male and female non-writers to write.

Darnell started working with this idea in the early 90's. The result was *Legends of Druidawn*, a role-playing game that she designed. Set on a distant planet where "magic roams wild and humans are forbidden," the game is ideal for two to six players (but can be played by more). It appeals to a wide span of ages, even children as young as six. With younger players, an adult, such as a teacher or parent, functions as the GM (in this case called the "Legend Guardian"). With older students, middle and high schoolers, the players themselves can take turns performing this function.



At Brideun, Darnell oversees several after-school clubs that play the game. They meet twice a month for sessions that last up to two hours and include gaming, writing, and critiquing each other's stories; but that's not the only time students devote to *Legends of Druidawn*. Outside of the club, the gamers tend to devote considerable time and thought to creating their characters – an important task in any role-playing game.

### So Where's the Writing?

Players document the details about their characters on a form called a character sheet that brings the player's character to life. The character sheet typically lists information about the character, including strength and intelligence, how much charisma the character has, and – since this is fantasy – what paranormal traits the character possesses. These attributes influence the character's actions and responses to situations during the course of the game. *Druidawn* players can go far beyond the scope of a typical character sheet, adding details about their character's pets, their weapons, their homes, or other aspects of their lives.

According to Darnell, the character sheet is the key to getting players to write. They can start gradually, with minimal writing or none at all, dictating ideas about their character to someone who records the information. Then, as players become more and more involved in the game, they start to record their ideas and write stories about their characters themselves. Prompting this move are the bonus points available from the





## A Teacher's Quest, continued

Legend Guardian for completing certain writing tasks. With bonus points, players can "get to a higher level" – progress in the game. Their progress may depend on writing a letter to get something they need, for example, or using correct spelling or correct punctuation in what they're asked to write.

### The Results

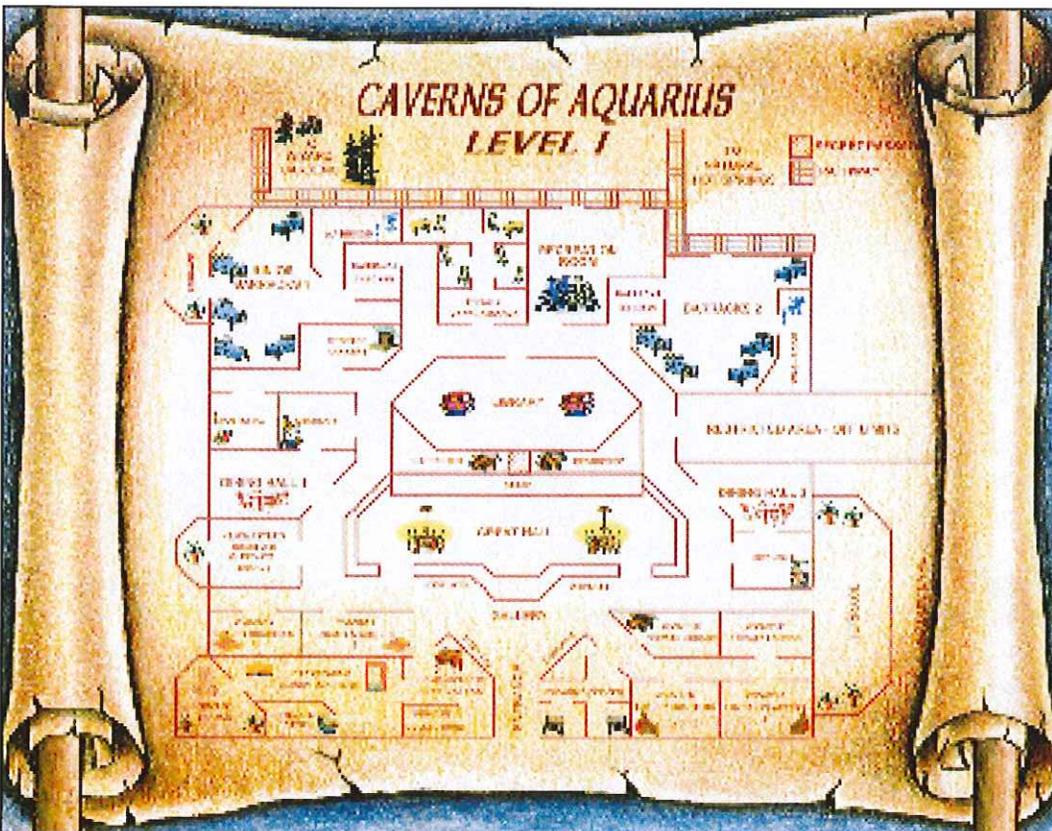
In the seven years Darnell has been using *Druidawn* with students, she has watched kids overcome their writing block as they play. "The more they do it, the easier it gets," she explains. "As kids overcome their fear and anxiety, they begin to write without the game."

The evidence appears in the book *Druidawn, Volume 1* (DeLeon, 2002), an anthology of fantasy short stories and artwork written and illustrated by young people. The stories are an outgrowth of the game, based on the same fantasy world. A companion website, [www.Druidawn.com](http://www.Druidawn.com), offers young writers a forum where they can express themselves creatively and possibly have their work published in a future volume of

*Druidawn*. The site also offers opportunities to work with writing mentors and to connect with other young writers around the world.

Parents and students are equally enthusiastic about Miriam Darnell's unique approach to teaching writing. According to the parents of an 11-year-old boy, their son has undergone a dramatic change since becoming a *Legends of Druidawn* player. "We have not been able to keep him from reading and writing. He is dyslexic and reading and writing have always been a struggle. Well, not any more! His imagination is on fire. He is drawing detailed maps, planning campaigns, learning every detail about the beings that inhabit *Druidawn*."

Darnell is not surprised. She's seen it happen over and over again with her students. "You can't just teach the form of writing," she explains. "Kids have to be emotionally involved in what they're writing." A fantasy world of heroes and quests gives them the chance to do just that. ☐



*Legends of Druidawn* can be used in the classroom, as an after-school activity, or at home. The game can be purchased alone or together with a copy of *Druidawn, Volume 1*. (For use with children under 12, Miriam Darnell recommends purchasing the game without *Druidawn, Volume 1*.)

For additional information on *Legends of Druidawn* or on receiving training on how to implement the game in the classroom, visit this website: <http://www.creative-writing-solutions.com/> or contact Miriam Darnell at: [miriamsilver@hotmail.com](mailto:miriamsilver@hotmail.com).