The Achievement Gap in Gifted Education: Motivating Intermediate Students

By

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is on the challenges that teachers face when trying to address the needs of underachieving gifted students, particularly in the intermediate grades (seven and eight). Gifted students with a profound achievement gap (the discrepancy between their expected level of achievement and their actual level of achievement) pose unique difficulties for teachers to encourage them in the classroom to reach their potential. Through a review of the current literature on gifted underachievement and the commonalities among underachieving students, this study addresses the current academic climate when discussing these issues. This develops further through a qualitative research study with three practicing teachers, who share their experiences in teaching gifted students at these grades, and what methods have worked for them and where they still need continuing assistance and professional development to understand how to help these students. Following these challenges, the experiences of these teachers are related back to the academic literature, and combined to determine the next steps for future research, and to determine where this area of research could expand to address the needs of these students in a more comprehensive manner.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The process of writing this paper has been a long one, so there are a few people that I would like to thank for their assistance at each step of the way and their involvement with this research. First, my partner, Olav Jordan, for putting up with me throughout these past two years of the program, as he has listened to my complaints and challenges through this whole process, and provided me with some semblance of stability for my own emotional and mental well-being. Similarly, I extend that thanks to my mother, Marsha Mann, who has also served as a resource for bouncing ideas off from a different, and non-education oriented, perspective. As well as reminding me of the experiences I went through when I was younger, and supporting me through my own challenges in my gifted program and helping me realize where they fit in with the research I have been conducting.

Of course, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to each of the teachers who agreed to be interviewed and participate in this research study. Appearing under the pseudonyms of Benjamin, Jessa, and Isabel, I would like to thank them for their involvement, as without their participation this would not have been possible. Thank you for sharing your experiences and your challenges with me, and I have done my best to faithfully represent what you have told me, and the struggles that you have faced in your classrooms.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Research Study

There is a staggering problem within gifted education when it comes to underachieving students. Educators and parents alike have an expectation that students in gifted programs will be achieving at much higher levels than other students, yet there are suggestions that “between 15% and 50% of gifted children achieve significantly below their intellectual and creative potential in their personal, work-related, and academic lives” (Morisano & Shore, 2010, p. 249). While that is a wide range, the suggestion that up to 50% of high potential ability students do not achieve well is a repeated one in the literature, consistent over the past few decades (Hoffman, Wasson, & Christianson, 1985; Rimm, 1987). The issue of underachievement in gifted education is a serious concern for many teachers who work with gifted students, and it has yet to see any resolution despite extensive research in the topic (Hebert & Shrieber, 2010, p. 570).

This research study investigates the problem of underachievement in gifted students, with an age focus at the middle school level (predominantly grades seven and eight). In particular, I look at the role motivation plays in students who are labelled as underachievers from their teacher’s perspective, and whether a focus on increasing motivation encourages further achievement, and what the most effective way of accomplishing this might be. This study also explains what the current research in the field suggests teachers should do when faced with an underachieving high-potential student, as well as what teachers in the field currently do, and whether these two areas actually line up. For this, there is also a component of how effective current teachers find these strategies when working with their students.
The issue of underachievement in gifted education is a recurring problem in educational research, going back to studies from the 1960s and earlier – such as Mallinson’s (1962) study of underachieving gifted children in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) - assessing how to cope with underachieving gifted students and the problem of talent loss among our most high-potential students. While the definitions of “gifted” and “underachievement” have frequently altered since those studies were undertaken, with earlier studies focusing primarily on the intelligence quotient (IQ) of their students (Mallinson, 1962), while current ones look more at the discrepancy between expected and actual achievement (Clemons, 2008; McGee, 2013; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Siegle, 2013), the basic ideas remain the same. There is a continuing problem with high-potential students failing to reach their full potential, and the reactions in how to deal with the problem are varied with no consistent rate of success shown across the research. Motivation is one variable that frequently appears as a potential reason for the underachievement, yet there has been no resolution to the issue, suggesting that either there is more to the problem than strictly motivation, or else implementation of strategies designed to motivate students in the classroom have not been effective (Rakow, 2011, p.11; Siegle, 2013, p. 105).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The lack of changes throughout the decades of research leads to the purpose of this study - to investigate a more effective method for teachers to encourage and motivate their students who are struggling in the classroom, and enable them to reach their greatest potential. While my focus in this study is on gifted education, the results are applicable to other classrooms as well, and could help identify an area that may need further exploration in relation to reasons for underachievement in intermediate students. Having students in the classroom who are not
reaching their potential is an issue for all teachers, and can prove to be a distraction in the classroom for other students. Providing a better alternative for addressing students who are underachieving will aid both teacher and student, and can go beyond the standard advice when teaching gifted students. This standard advice tells teachers that they should make all assignments (a) more challenging and (b) more engaging (Siegle, 2013, p. 105). This advice is prevalent within gifted education; however, the problem of underachievement persists across gifted classrooms. Something further must need to be done in order to encourage all students to be involved in their learning processes.

1.3 Research Questions

The overall goal of this research is to determine what teachers can do to work more effectively with underachieving gifted students, particularly in areas of motivation of middle school students (grades seven and eight). The specific research questions are as follows:

1) What are the current theories on the reason for underachievement in gifted students?

The literature review portion of this paper addresses how this study fits in with the current research and theoretical basis for studying underachievement in gifted students, and this includes information about how we classify students as gifted, as well as how we identify them as underachieving. Having this information helps to guide the rest of the study and the interview process with the teachers, as well as to demonstrate the need for further research in this area to help our students.

2) How are teachers taught to handle underachieving gifted students?
Frequently, I have heard the claim that classroom material and activities just need to be more engaging for the students, and all issues of underachievement will be resolved; however, the issue continues to persevere as a challenging one to teachers, suggesting that there is more depth to this problem. This is an idea that pervades the literature as well as teachers who are currently teaching gifted students and have learned strategies from other professionals within the field of education on addressing their underachievement. The question here, for my purposes, is whether there is a more effective way of encouraging students rather than increasing the challenge and trying to tailor every assignment to their own interests, so that we can more consistently close the achievement gap in our students.

3) *Is there a lack of motivation evident in underachieving students?*

This applies to students of all range of potential, not only gifted or high-potential students. From the question about motivation, this can develop further into the ways of addressing motivational issues, including how teachers can better motivate their students. This will be contrasted with discussion about overachievers this classrooms, and how their teachers assess their motivation levels.

4) *What is the difference between underachievers and selective achievers?*

Information on selective achievement will therefore also be included in this paper, including whether viewing these students as selective achievers rather than underachievers has any effect on how their teachers try to assist them. This includes a definition of selective achievement, as well as how we can distinguish it from underachievement.

5) *What other commonalities are there with underachieving students?*
This may lead to another area to focus on in case motivation proves to be insufficient in addressing issues that underachieving students face, as there may be better results in taking a combined approach, addressing motivation in conjunction with other underlying factors (depending on the student). Having more detail about what these commonalities are will help to create a better overall picture of what affects underachieving students.

1.4 Background of the Researcher

The issue of underachievement in gifted classrooms is one that I have been interested in since I was a middle school student myself. I was in the gifted program for five years (grades four through eight), and would estimate that 50% or more of the students in my grade seven and eight classes were underachievers; merely getting by in the program rather than embracing the ideals that the gifted program is supposed to promote in students. There was a profound achievement gap for many of my classmates, with myself included for those two years. The love of learning was lacking for many of us, and I was surprised in later years to discover that this was not limited to my class, but rather that it occurs in other gifted programs as well. I found this quite shocking, as I had always imagined that the gifted program was supposed to foster these ideals of high achievement and exploring potential more than in the regular classrooms. During my practice teaching in the fall of 2013, I was in a gifted grade seven classroom, and saw many similar attitudes within the three classes I taught. While the numbers were not quite as high as to what I had personally experienced at that age, there will still quite a few underachievers in each of the three classes. I spent another practicum in a gifted grade eight class in the fall of 2014, and noticed similar situations with the students there. While those underachieving students would occasionally be engaged and participate in classroom activities, they were frequently uninterested, and appeared entirely unperturbed by the idea of doing poorly on an assignment or
not even turning it in at all. When they were engaged, it rarely stayed with them beyond the classroom environment; they were unlikely to continue working on the assignment or project at home. There appeared to be an attitude that nothing they were doing at this stage mattered, so there was no point to putting any effort in when they did not want to, or had other things they would rather be doing. With this in mind, both of these factors of my personal experience, myself as a student and as a teacher, have led me to have an interest in research in this area, and a desire to figure out how best to reach these students. There is so much that these underachieving students could get out of the education system, and skills that they could develop that would be beneficial later in life, that we have to find a way to encourage them throughout their education.

1.5 Overview

This research study is broken up into five different sections. Chapter 1, which is the current chapter, has covered the introduction to the study, its purpose, the research questions, and my own involvement with the topic and why I am interested in this area of research.

Chapter 2 is a literature review, providing information about the studies and the research in this field that previous researchers have already explored, and determining how my research fits in with the current work in the field. This is where I will demonstrate the gaps in the research and why my study is relevant to the current problems in education, particularly related to the effectiveness of the strategies presented in the actual classroom.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of my methodology and the procedures used in this study for conducting interviews and collecting data from the participants, as well as information about the selection of the participants and their role in this research study. This will also introduce
some brief information about the three participants, although further background on them will appear in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 is where I present my findings. Here, I talk more about the teachers who I interviewed for this study, and what their experiences have been in the classroom. The section is divided into themes based around my initial research questions (presented earlier in this current chapter), and I relate what the teachers have said to these themes in order to organize the findings.

Finally, chapter 5 is the discussion chapter. In this chapter, I relate my findings back to the literature review I conducted and show how they align with certain areas of the research, and present gaps in other areas for what is actually effective in the classroom. This chapter also reviews the limitations of the study again, as well as suggestions some implications of the research, and what further studies should happen to expand upon this work.

References and a list of appendices follow at the end of this document.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction to Literature

In moving through the literature review portion of this study, I have divided up the literature into four main categories: defining underachievement, underachievement in gifted education, teaching curriculum, and motivation.

2.2 Defining underachievement

Before I can look at how to address underachievement in gifted students, it is important to determine how we are deciding what students we identify as underachievers. First, I look at what definitions of underachievement there are and how they are measured. I also consider the differences between underachievers and selective achievers in an attempt to discern whether students may be misidentified, and how this affects the way in which we try to address their achievement gap as teachers.

2.2.1 How do we determine whether a student is an underachiever?

In the past, there have been some very specific definitions of underachievement used for the purpose of research studies. For instance, in Mallinson’s (1962) study, the gifted underachievers partaking in his research were those who had an I.Q. above 120 (as their mark of giftedness), and had to repeat a grade, barely passed into the next grade, were judged unable to cope with their program, or were assessed at six months or more below their current grade level. Mallinson’s (1962) study is the earliest I look at for this literature review, and represents some of the older definitions of giftedness and underachievement. In Emerick’s (2004) research, he had similar criteria for students’ involvement in his study, judging that the participants must be assessed as gifted (through at least a 90th percentile on standardized testing or an I.Q. of 125 or
higher), and sustained underachievement defined simply as average or below-average academic performance. This definition expects that the performance of the gifted students would be at an above-average level, so Emerick (2004) defines underachievement as anything lower than that. This characterization of gifted underachievement falls more in line with the general definition provided by McCracken and Siegle (2003) of underachievers as “students who exhibit a severe discrepancy between expected achievement… and actual achievement” (p. 145). This is echoed by Morisano and Shore (2010), as they also define gifted underachievement as “a discrepancy between actual achievement and intelligence” (p. 250), and once again by Siegle (2013) himself as he refers to underachievement as “discrepancy between expected and actual performance” (p. 9). On this point, the literature seems in agreement towards this definition, with expected performance usually classified by standardized achievement testing or intellectual ability testing, and actual achievement as assessed by in-class work and teacher evaluation (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). For the purposes of my research, then, I refer to underachievement as demonstrating an achievement gap between students’ expected level of achievement and their actual level of achievement, as assessed by their teacher.

2.2.2 How do we distinguish underachievement from selective achievement?

While we look at underachieving gifted students, it is important to distinguish between underachievers and selective achievers. With selective achievers, Hebert and Shreiber (2010) have noted that it is more common to see “evidence of strong intrinsic motivation” (p. 579) while this is frequently lacking in underachievers (as will be noted in the next portion of this literature review). Continuing with Hebert and Shreiber (2010), selective achievers are more likely to be independent and self-directed, putting their effort towards what interests them and still demonstrating their abilities in certain areas. Siegle (2013) supports this view of selective
achievers by stating that they are more likely to be high achievers in the areas that interest them, while choosing to avoid those that they consider unimportant. The selective achievers will show more discrepancy in their grades across different subject areas based on the amount of effort they are putting into those subjects, with more willingness to do work on the topics that interest them. In this regard, it is more important to focus on students who are underachievers, in that they are the ones “who are failing to achieve in any productive area over a period time” (Siegle, 2013, p. 16). In this, Siegle (2013) and Hebert and Shreiber (2010) agree that selective achievers are in more of a position to succeed throughout their education once they are interested in a topic, whereas underachievers are unproductive across all subject areas.

2.3 Underachievement in Gifted Education

The first question to answer in regards to gifted underachievers is whether this is actually an important problem in regards to their education. After all, previous definitions talk about underachievement even being performance at an average level for their grade, which would be acceptable for students not labelled as gifted. After I address that issue, I move on to assessing the reported characteristics of underachievers across five different studies, in order to gain an understanding of which characteristics repeat the most and are therefore the most prevalent across the studies.

2.3.1 Is underachievement in gifted education a problem?

As noted in the introduction to this research study, Morisano and Shore (2010) commented that “between 15% and 50% of gifted children achieve significantly below their intellectual and creative potential in their personal, work-related, and academic lives” (p. 249). Hebert and Shreiber (2010) note that there has been “extensive research on this complex
phenomenon [but] the issue remains an unsolved problem” (p. 570). Similarly, Emerick (2004) found that throughout all the research the image we have of the underachieving gifted student remains “complex and often contradictory and inconclusive” (p. 106) continuing on to say that “interventions reported by researchers have failed or have had limited success” (p. 106). These numbers alone show that there is a significant problem when it comes to underachievement within gifted education. The extensive research over the past few decades demonstrate that this is an area that still requires more development in order to aid these students in their education. As teachers, we should focus on helping our students fully reach their potential, which is where these students are struggling.

2.3.2 What characteristics do underachievers have/share?

In terms of the shared characteristics of underachievers, the list is extensive and varied. For ease of comparing the various studies on this, the following chart (contained on the next page) displays each of the mentioned characteristics as well as the source of each one. For ones mentioned in numerous studies, each of the studies they are listed under the source column.
Table 1: Characteristics of Underachieving Gifted Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low academic self-perception</td>
<td>Siegle (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morisano &amp; Shore (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-efficacy</td>
<td>Siegle (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morisano &amp; Shore (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-motivation</td>
<td>Siegle (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rakow, (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morisano &amp; Shore (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clemons (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low effort toward academic tasks</td>
<td>Siegle (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rakow, (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clemons (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External attributions</td>
<td>Siegle (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low goal valuation</td>
<td>Siegle (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative attitude toward school and teachers</td>
<td>Siegle (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morisano &amp; Shore (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-regulatory or metacognitive skills</td>
<td>Siegle (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic status</td>
<td>Morisano &amp; Shore (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clemons (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental expectations &amp; values</td>
<td>Morisano &amp; Shore (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clemons (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive pressure to succeed &amp; perfectionism</td>
<td>Rakow, (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morisano &amp; Shore (2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Across this table, the only characteristic listed by all five studies referenced here is low self-motivation. In this case, some of the authors have revealed a correlational relationship between low self-motivation with some of the other characteristics. For instance, McCoach and Siegle (2003) found that “the goal valuation and motivation factors were highly correlated with each other” (p. 151). Morisano and Shore (2010) note this correlation as well, who state that it
may be “inaccurate to speak of a lack of motivation altogether, because [students] might be quite motivated to engage in learning activities unrelated to specific schoolwork assignments” (p. 250-251). Schick and Phillipson (2009) also studied underperformance in students with high intellectual potential, but identified a narrower focus than the other studies referenced, concluding that “the contributions of those aspects of personality related to the development of personal identity are the most important predictors of learning motivation” (p. 31), thus leading to the underachievement aspect. They, too, focused on the issue of motivation in this portion of their analysis. While it is worthwhile to remember that these characteristics may not pervade the entire lives of the students, they are identified in these studies in relation to their underachievement on schoolwork.

2.4 Teaching Curriculum

With the various suggested characteristics of underachievers in mind, we next have to address how we acknowledge these traits in order to improve the performance of underachievers in the classroom. First, I look at what recommendations exist in the literature in relation to combating underachievement in the classroom, and then what documents aimed toward teachers suggest in regards to strategies for teaching gifted students in general.

2.4.1 How can we reverse trends of underachievement?

There are a few main topics for addressing underachieving students: to start, a common issue is the level of challenge present in the work the students are doing. Siegle (2013) emphasizes the importance of the right amount of academically challenging work, and suggests that it needs pairing with intellectual stimulation to provoke interest in the students toward taking on the more challenging work. He develops this idea further in saying that an important factor in
increasing students’ interest levels in education and in the classroom is to have them do “authentic learning that culminates in authentic products or services for authentic audiences” (p. 106). Rakow (2011) argues similarly for authentic learning and increased challenge, adding that students must also have some choice in what they will be studying and how. This will encourage higher self-efficacy among the students if they are involved in the process of deciding what they will be learning about in the classroom. Through these methods, Rakow (2011) suggests that the underachievement stemming from boredom on the part of students can be avoided, which Siegle (2013) also suggests arises from a lack of intellectual stimulation. The main factors here then are the level of challenge, intellectual stimulation, and student choice in the work that they are doing and how they do it.

Being involved in the process of choosing topics and ways of demonstrating learning leads in to some of the next suggestions for reversing underachievement, which focus on personal goal setting for students. Morisano and Shore (2010) argue that too often educators focus on “providing aims and objectives for their children” (p. 250) while they would benefit more from being able to set their own goals for their work, encouraging them in “developing self-understanding [and] cultivating [their] creative and academic potential and productivity” (p. 250). With this technique, students would be able to reflect upon what areas of study would interest them, and learn how to pursue these topics in a fruitful manner. Hebert and Shreiber (2010) found similar results in their study of two university-aged individuals who were identified as gifted when they were younger, where the young men were motivated by practical knowledge and by the challenge of meeting goals that they had set themselves rather than some external reward provided for them. This demonstrates a development of internal motivation through this goal setting, rather than relying on external motivation for encouragement. This research
suggests three main areas of focus: authentic learning that is challenging and stimulating, student involvement in course development, and personal goal setting.

2.4.2 What recommendations are provided to teachers who teach gifted students?

Once the research turns to sources aimed at teachers, predominantly in the form of curriculum resources, the focus seems to narrow quite a bit from what the academic literature discusses. VanTassel-Baska (2004) develops three effective curriculum models for teaching gifted students. These models are the content mastery model (“learning skills and concepts within a predetermined domain of inquiry”; p. 3), the process/product model (“learning investigatory skills...that allow students to develop a high-quality product”; p. 5), and the epistemological concept model (“understanding and appreciation of systems of knowledge”; p. 7). This focuses on teaching gifted students to learn about the “why” and “how” of their education, rather than solely the “what” of the details they are learning, in order to continue past the content mastery model. Maker and Shiever (2010) also advocate for the same three models in teaching gifted students in their work. For VanTassel-Baska and Brown (2007), the focus of much of the curriculum for gifted students is on providing advanced or accelerated curricula for gifted learners and developing further critical thinking skills, and much of the research supports this for the average gifted learner. While they acknowledge that there is greater growth for students when they have a higher motivation level through more engagement with the content, the focus remains on more enriched/augmented curriculum to encourage students to reach their potential. Frequently, however, accelerated curricula is not practical, and becomes more of a situation of increasing depth of the curricula studied at that grade level. Returning to Maker and Shiever (2010), the bulk of the suggestions for teachers developing curriculum for gifted students
focus around a teacher-centred model of development, in which the students are not involved in the design of the course and lack choice in the curriculum.

**2.5 Motivation**

As mentioned earlier in this literature review, low self-motivation is the top characteristic mentioned in regards to underachieving gifted students by all five of the studies referenced. Increasing motivation is a complex issue, however, with many different probable approaches to the issue depending on the nature of the student involved and what is already taking place in the classroom.

2.5.1 How can teachers motivate students in the classroom?

When focusing on motivating underachieving gifted students, there are a few different suggestions that arise from the literature. The first is the standard appraisal when it comes to encouraging gifted students, which McCoach and Siegle (2003) demonstrate in stating that the teacher needs to create “classes and assignments that are more enjoyable and intrinsically motivating for students” (p. 144). In this, they are tying the issue of motivation in with choosing subjects/topics that are most enjoyable for the students to approach in their academic work, similar to Siegle’s (2013) suggestion regarding work being both intellectually stimulating and academic challenging in order to benefit students at the highest level. This focuses on the idea that the underachievement and lack of motivation directly links to a lack of interest in the subject matter taught.

The next suggestion comes from Morisano and Shore (2010), re-visiting the idea of involving students in creating their own goals for their education in each course. They state that
this goal setting process provides them with a way of guiding internal motivation by getting personally involved with their learning, and goals can increase performance through four ways:

(a) both cognitively and behaviourally directing attention and effort toward goal-relevant activities and away from goal-irrelevant activities;

(b) energizing, with high goals leading to greater effort than low goals;

(c) increasing persistence, with demanding goals prolonging effort; and

(d) affecting action indirectly by leading to the arousal, discovery, and utilization of task-relevant knowledge and strategies. (Morisano & Shore, 2010, p. 252)

The setting of goals directly involves the students with their own education, and also brings back the issue of students having a choice in what they are learning and how they are demonstrating their learning. Emerick (2004) identifies academic goals as one of the factors identified by students “as having a positive impact on their academic performance” (p. 115). Many of the others he identified were issues outside of the control of the students (such as parental influence and the teacher), thus leaving goal setting as one of the only things they could control that would lead to an increase in intrinsic motivation.

2.6 Literature Review Conclusion

There has been an extensive collection of literature available on this topic, with no clear conclusions of the best way to address underachievement in the gifted classroom. While there are many theories, most of them come from the approach of researchers entering the classroom, rather than direct opinions from teachers dealing with these students on a regular basis and who have more of a connection with them. In that way, my research will be focusing on what the
teachers themselves are doing, and what information they are getting from other educators in the field. As seen in the literature review, the information aimed towards teachers tends to differ from the information in the rest of the research, with the teacher-centred research focusing more on making the curriculum challenging, rather than developing the internal motivation of the students. While there is an issue with selective achievement in gifted students as well, this study is focusing on underachieving students who have a more pervasive issue than the selective achievers; while the basic suggestions of making the content more engaging would appeal to selective achievers, it does not appear to work as well with underachievers. This is where the challenges arise for their teachers.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Procedure

This qualitative research study on motivation in gifted education investigates two main types of information: research studies through the literature review section, as well as face-to-face interviews with practicing teachers in the public school system in Southern Ontario, teaching grades seven and eight. As part of the interview, each teacher received a demographic questionnaire to fill out as well, in order to provide an understanding of their teaching background and experience with gifted students (see Appendix D). My aim through the interview process was to ascertain what level of experience the teachers have had with gifted students in the past, any struggles they have encountered relating to motivation of students, as well as what support they have received from fellow teachers and from school administration. I also expanded upon what commonalities they noticed among their underachieving students, and their perceptions of the differences between underachieving and selectively achieving students.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The data collection for this study includes demographic questionnaires distributed to participating teachers before the interview, as well as through the interview questions themselves (see Appendices C and D for the interview and demographic questions provided). The purpose of the surveys was to collect demographic information about the participating teachers as well as their background in teaching, to provide context to the face-to-face interview. I recorded the interviews using an application on my phone, and transcribed them to the computer in order to have an accurate representation of the answers provided by each of the teachers, as well as a reference point to return to when assessing all of the data. Data assessment took place through
coding the interviews in a qualitative fashion, and a data analysis genesis once finished transcribing and coding all of the interviews.

The interview questions relate to the teacher’s experiences in teaching gifted education, and they are organized into the following three main areas of focus. The first indicates general experiences in gifted education, in regards to what challenges they have encountered, any achievement gaps in their classrooms, and their sense of the classroom environment and student involvement. The second area asks about the support they have received from fellow teachers and school administration, such as what types of advice they have been given, what resources (if any) have been recommended when working with gifted students, and what their focus is on when working with gifted students. Finally, the third area of interest is specifically in motivation. This covers topics such as what motivational challenges they perceive in the classroom, how they try to motivate their students, and what they think works best when trying to encourage gifted learners (see Appendix C for specific questions in the interview protocol). While this interview protocol was the basis for the interview process, some questions were asked that are not strictly from the protocol, depending on how the interview was proceeding. Similarly, the order in which the questions appear varied based on the flow of the interview, to encourage a more conversational tone.

3.3 Participants

This study includes three participants, who are practicing teachers in public schools in the Toronto area, and certified by the Ontario College of Teachers. Each of these teachers have a background in teaching gifted students, with a range of experience from being in their first year teaching a gifted program through having taught gifted classes for multiple years. Given that the focus of this study is on gifted learners in adolescence, the teacher participants have experience
in teaching gifted learners in grades seven and/or eight, to address that particular age of students and their performance in the classroom. These teachers selected for the study based on an array of experiences, having one teacher who is relatively new to teaching gifted students, one more experienced, and one who has taught a range of gifted and mainstream classrooms for the past few years. The purpose of selecting teachers with this range of experience was to gauge whether there is any change in how they view motivation in gifted classrooms through their experience, as compared with the initial instruction they receive when starting out in a gifted classroom. This is particularly useful in assessing what kinds of information are provided to teachers in gifted classrooms, and how they are instructed to view motivational issues at the beginning of their careers as well as once they have become more experienced and established as teachers of gifted students. More information about each of the three teachers involved and their particular backgrounds is located in the next chapter, at the beginning of the discussions about the findings of this study.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection includes the written demographic questionnaires and face-to-face interviews with the three teachers involved. Each of the teachers were available for face-to-face interviews; other methods were not required for this study, and each of the demographic questionnaires were also completed at the start of the interview. In terms of the face-to-face interviews, I recorded the audio of the interviews and then later the same day transcribed the information from the recorder on to my desktop computer, to have an accurate written copy of each of the interviews, including commentary on any recollection of physical habits/pauses. Once the interview transcriptions were complete, I analyzed the interviews to ascertain any themes present through each of the participants’ testimony, through a qualitative coding of the
data and tabled data analysis genesis. This was done through individual readings of each of the interviews, to gain a holistic impression of the participant’s views, and then through a more intensive highlighting of relevant sections of the interview that fall within the themes of my study and literature review through the coding process. Then I compared these coded sections between each of the participants, in order to determine any connections between their responses as well as identify any major contradictions between them (which turned out to be minimal).

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

My study is limited to surveying and interviewing current teachers face-to-face, and is therefore meets the ethical approval standards from the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto). In keeping in line with these ethical standards, all participants in this study remain anonymous through this research paper, with their choice of a pseudonym to appear under in the findings section, and they received and signed a consent form for their participation in this research that I collected before conducting the demographic questionnaire and the interview. Upon compilation of my findings and drafting of the major themes, each of the interviewees were provided with an opportunity to review the sections of the project related to their testimony and how the data was organized, and to comment on any discrepancies they may feel exist based around my interpretations of the interviews that I have conducted. Each of the interviewees have approved of their representations in this study, and that their testimony was faithfully recorded.

3.6 Limitations

In terms of limitations, a few main issues arise. First, since this study is focused on only three participants, it is rather limited in scope in terms of the breadth of classrooms discussed for the experience of underachievement in students. I have addressed this to a small degree by the
fact that the teachers involved have experiences with many different gifted classrooms, but the fact that there are only three teachers involved is limiting in itself. The geographical scope of this research is also problematic, in that it takes place in a small part of Ontario, and therefore will only address issues that appear in this geographic region. Each of the teachers involved teaches at a different school, in different areas of the city, to try to address a more widespread conception of the challenges the students face. While these issues may be applicable to other classrooms, it is difficult to ascertain whether this is the case without making assumptions about how other classrooms interact and whether the geographical region makes a difference on the behaviour of gifted learners. Due to the nature of the ethical approval for this study, there is also a limitation in the fact that the interviews are happening solely with the teachers, rather than including student input on their experience of their underachievement.

There is also somewhat of a limitation in regards to my own experience with gifted education. As mentioned when discussing my background, I was in a gifted program from grade four through grade eight, which informs my perception of how these students may be feeling and what occurs in the classroom. While this bias is present, I have done my best throughout this study to acknowledge this bias and focus on the data presented, which I feel has differed from my expectations at the start of this study, which were based on my experience. In this way, my own lived experience has an impact on the research I have done, and may appear as a limitation in how it colours my interpretation, though I have done my best to try to mitigate those factors.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction to Findings

The findings from this study are the result of interviews with the three participants introduced in the previous chapter. All three of these teachers are currently teaching grade seven and/or grade eight gifted classes, and have agreed to be interviewed and to have their interviews used for the purpose of this research paper. All participants in this paper remain anonymous, with pseudonyms of their choosing used in place of their real names and removal of any mention of their workplaces, student names, or other identifying information. Throughout this chapter I will be providing an analysis of the findings from these interviews, organized through major themes that relate back to my initial research questions.

4.2 Participant Backgrounds

Each of the three participants involved in this study currently teach grade seven or grade eight gifted classes as part of their duties at their school. They each have a varied level of experience with gifted students and with other students throughout their teaching careers, but are dedicated toward helping their gifted students achieve their full potentials and have concerns about the underachievement they see in their classrooms. All three of these participants are part of schoolboards in Southern Ontario, sharing similar policies about the focus of the gifted classroom.

The first participant, who chose to appear under the pseudonym of “Benjamin”, has been teaching for seven years, with two years of having his own classroom at his current school. The previous year he was teaching as part of the Home School Program, and now he is teaching a grade eight gifted homeroom class. He also teaches the other grade eight students at the school in
his rotary Science class, sometimes making comparisons in his interview between the performance levels of the mainstream classrooms as compared with the gifted classroom. Out of the three teachers interviewed for this research paper, Benjamin is the newest to teaching intermediate gifted students, having less than a year of experience at the time of the interview.

The second participant in this study chose to be represented under the pseudonym of “Jessa”, and has been teaching her own classroom for the past twelve years. She has more experience in the area of gifted education, having taught a grade four gifted class for one year; a grade five and six split class for two years; and then finally a grade seven gifted class for the past three years. The rest of her time teaching has been a range of different grades, though she has not had any experience in teaching grade eight, so she has considered herself to be able to compare what she sees in her gifted classes with what she noticed when teaching students who were not labelled as being gifted.

The final participant in this research project chose the name "Isabel" to represent her here. She has been teaching for seven years, though has had her own classroom for the past five years. As a rotary Science teacher at her school, she has been teaching both grade seven and eight students for those five years, with one grade seven gifted class and one grade eight gifted class each year. Isabel is in a unique position for this study in that she has been teaching gifted classes alongside mainstream classes for the whole of her teaching career, and has been able to see how the different subject matters approached in her Science classroom are handled by the students in each of these classes over the years.
4.3 Key Findings

In order to organize my findings from this research in a coherent manner, I have chosen to structure them in a way reflective of my original research questions for this paper. There are five main themes to be covered, gained through four of the research questions and a general overview of the presence of underachievement in their gifted classrooms. The first theme addressed will be the general overview, looking at how underachievement presents itself particular to the gifted classroom. The second theme will cover responses related to Teacher Approaches to Underachievement, demonstrating what the teachers are doing in their classrooms to encourage their students to perform at higher levels, and what they are instructed to do by other educators who they ask for advice on these matters. The third theme addresses Motivation and Underachievement; what these teachers are saying about motivation levels of their students, and how it compares to the rest of the classroom. Fourth, responses related to Underachievement as Compared to Selective Achievement. This will address whether these under-performing students are underachieving, or whether they are demonstrating traits related to selective achievement in the classroom, as defined earlier in the Literature Review portion. Finally, the last theme will address Commonalities among Underachieving Students, as a basis for understanding whether there are other similarities un-related to motivational issues discussed in the second theme.

4.4 Underachievement in the Gifted Classroom

The first thing to establish with each of the interviewed teachers was their viewpoint on this challenge of an achievement gap, and whether it was a concern that any of them had with their students in their gifted classrooms. Then, we moved on to discuss whether this was
something that was unique to the gifted program and students with high expected achievement levels, or whether this was something they witnessed across the board in their classrooms.

4.4.1 The presence of an achievement gap

Each of the teachers I spoke with and interviewed agreed that they had noticed some level of achievement gap in their classroom, usually being able to think of specific students when commenting on the issue. Frequently, the range of the gap (or size of the gap) would vary greatly depending on the student, while still being noticeable among many, as Benjamin commented, “it’s very pronounced in some cases [but] not as pronounced in others” (November 28, 2014). Benjamin had also noted that for some students, this gap was different depending on the way the students were expressing themselves, and the way that their work was focused, stating:

I think developing higher order thinking in a written form for some students is where their gap is. Where I think if they put more time and effort into developing that side of their thinking and communicating they would be able to close that gap. (Benjamin, November 28, 2014)

In this, Benjamin has related his students’ achievement gap towards a lack of effort in certain areas of their work, as he went on to state that many of them had a focus on simply getting down “the answer”, rather than extending their thinking about why they were doing that work, or why that answer was correct.

Jessa and Isabel had similar responses, both agreeing that there were achievement gaps present in their classrooms with particular students, and that the amount of the gap varied. Jessa acknowledged that she “notice[s] it more in the older grades” (December 8, 2014), suggesting that in her experience it has been a larger issue in the intermediate grades than in the junior ones.
that she has taught previously. For Isabel, she elaborated that it was not simply that some of her students were not performing at the level expected, but there was an intentional lack of effort on their part, that some of them “seem to completely check out all the time, and just are not interested in trying to do work” (January 12, 2015). Here, like Benjamin, Isabel suggests that the achievement gap is related to a distinct lack of effort in a particular area, or an absence of a desire to do well. This is something that the interviews explore further and will be discussed under the motivation theme.

4.4.2 Achievement gap in gifted classes

There was some divide among the interview subjects regarding whether this was an issue specific to gifted programs, or whether this was something prevalent in all classes in the intermediate grade range. For Benjamin, he felt that this was something he had noticed in his other classes, and had not noticed the gifted class to be especially different in having noticeable achievement gaps among his students. However, he acknowledged that other teachers he spoke with would frequently express frustration that the gifted students were not getting their work in, or were not putting in as much effort as they should be, that "there's definitely an idea, and the kids know this really clearly, that [they are] supposed to be this because [they are] gifted" (November 28, 2014) and that they were expected to be far more responsible than the other students. Jessa related her experience with her class to what the other teachers had experienced, finding that overall there was a perception that “they have more challenges getting the gifted students to live up to their expectations” (December 8, 2014). The question remains in that regard of whether that is related to the achievement gap being broader in actuality, or whether there is something to be said about the level of expectations that the teachers hold for their classes. Isabel, on the other hand, was much more adamant about the presence of a defined gap
in the classroom, going on to say that there is also “more divide in the program, and…that students tend towards one category or the other [underachievers or overachievers].” (January 12, 2015) In this way, the gifted program came across as very divisive: students were either underachieving and not living up to their potential, or putting in so much effort that they go “so far and beyond the expectations” (January 12, 2015) to try to ensure that they have achieved the highest possible grade. Through these interviews, it appears that though the issue of an achievement gap is occurring in other classes as well, there may be more of a pronounced issue in the gifted program with how we view student achievement and what we expect them to accomplish. The achievement gap is present potentially in higher rates than in mainstream classrooms.

4.5 Teacher Approaches to Underachievement

With each of the teachers acknowledging that there is an issue with underachievement in their classrooms, the next focus was on what actions they take to try to encourage higher levels of achievement with their students, and what recommendations they have received from other educators to do the same.

4.5.1 Addressing underachievement

All three of the teachers interviewed expressed their attempts at increasing their students’ achievement by providing material in the classroom that was more engaging, meaningful, and centered on student interests. This follows the typical recommendations for addressing underachievement in students, by getting them more involved with the academic process and encouraging them through topics that they enjoy and tasks that provide authentic opportunities for learning, as well as ensuring that work is challenging enough to interest the students (Siegle, 2013; Rakow, 2011). On top of these suggestions, Benjamin also included that he has been
focusing on reviewing the work with the students, and going through “the success criteria and looking at what they have been able to achieve” (November 28, 2014), so that the students have an understanding of the ways that they can improve their own work. Benjamin advocates for the use of descriptive feedback in this process, so that any work they receive back clearly explains how they can improve the next time they do an assignment. This focus on feedback emphasizes the importance of a students’ self-efficacy, and relies on the idea that the student will want to do better and achieve higher grades. Although Benjamin has found some success using these techniques with certain students, he finds that the students who are underachieving in all subject areas are less inclined to put forth the effort to bring their work to a higher caliber.

Jessa mainly focused on the engagement piece, starting off by saying that "trying to keep the classroom engaging and motivating helps" (December 8, 2014). Jessa also continued on to emphasize the importance of challenging the students so that they are not bored in the classroom, as gifted learners can find themselves stifled by the limited breadth of learning in some classrooms. She incorporates "activities that may be able to challenge them more" (December 8, 2014) that pose inquiry style questions to her students, in order to encourage them to find their own solutions to the curriculum related problems. Similar to Benjamin, she has had limited success with these methods. Many of her students have produced better work when they are interested in a certain subject, however there are still students who seem uninterested in taking a role in the classroom environment and contributing to the learning atmosphere. She expressed her frustration with this situation, saying “I have not been able to figure out a way to increase their achievement, beyond getting their parents more involved and watching their work from the home front” (December 8, 2014). This method has had some success, but she has also dealt with resentment from students who feel they are being forced to do this work by their teacher and
their parents, and they only do enough to satisfy the basic requirements and demonstrate that they have finished the assignment, rather than displaying the full range of their abilities. The technique works for students who are not submitting their work at all, but typically not for those who she wants to see a higher level of performance from on their assignments.

As a rotary Science teacher, Isabel has found that one of the important elements for her in increasing student interest and engagement has been “to incorporate a decent amount of hands-on learning and experimentation” (January 12, 2015). In her Science classes, her students tend to stay more on task and focused on the topic if they are physically involved with what they are learning about, which may involve the use of experiments or inquiry based work on the curriculum topics. For example, in the past she noticed that her students tended to struggle with learning the different functions of the cell and the roles of the various organelles. To try to grasp their attention and help them remember, she designed “a lesson based around the structure of the cell, using a cookie as the cell itself, icing as a cell membrane, and different candies as the different organelles” (January 12, 2015). In this, the students had to describe to her what they had done with their cookie and what each of the candies on it represented, in the hopes that this would help them remember these functions when it came time to test them on it. She has had success using these types of hands-on activities, but has found that it is not universal. Some of her students’ grades improved, but it was clear that some of the others had not put in any further effort to ensure that they remembered the information from the class.

With each of these teachers’ techniques, they found that some students had improved results from higher engagement in their classes. However, each of the teachers also reported that there were students who remained unengaged, and these were students labelled as underachievers in all of their subject areas. Although they tried different methods to help the
students who were not achieving to their full potential, they still saw resistance from these students towards doing any work beyond what was minimally required to achieve passing/suitable grades. This provides a starting point for looking at the issue of motivation in students, and what can actually motivate them to get work done in the classroom.

4.6 Motivation and Underachievement

With the challenges that underachieving gifted students face, the question frequently comes back to what the motivation is when they underachieve. Are they motivated to do better? Are there other factors that affect what they can achieve? How do we encourage them further? In looking at motivation for this theme, I am dividing this section into three sub-sections. The first will look at motivation in general, and the differences in internal and external motivations for the students. The second focuses on student goals and the relation to their motivation levels. Finally, I will wrap up this theme discussing the issue of procrastination, and how that affects their level of achievement and how driven they are to complete the work they are assigned.

4.6.1 Internal and External Motivation

One of the prime factors in looking at the issue of underachievement is how the students are motivated, and how motivated they are to complete their schoolwork. Having already discussed attempts at addressing underachievement, the teachers spoke about how they perceive their students’ motivation levels inside and outside of the classroom. Each teacher expressed disappointment at what they saw as a general lack of motivation from their underachieving students; however, this lack of motivation tended to manifest as more of a limited motivation. Benjamin discussed this limited motivation as related to their gifted designation, saying, “For them, things generally come, it is easy enough for them to get a B, or close to it, and that is good enough for them” (November 28, 2014). These students, in Benjamin’s view, are well aware that
they could achieve higher grades, yet they are just motivated enough to get by with a grade like a B, and use their time for other things instead. Jessa reported the same about her students, saying, “Some of the students just do not seem interested though, no matter what I present to them” (December 8, 2014). They are unwilling to put forth their full ability, and are unmotivated to seek those higher grades that they could achieve. Isabel also confirms this with her students, saying, “they think they do not have to put in the effort if they do not want to” (January 12, 2015), because they are able to achieve satisfactory grades in that way. She continued on to say that this tends to get more pronounced in grade eight, as “they can start to check out towards the end of the year, especially once they have their high school acceptances” (January 12, 2015), demonstrating the link between her students’ goals and their motivation levels in the classroom. This was a common view across all three of the teachers regarding how their underachieving students approach the classroom, and their levels of motivation.

Interestingly, Benjamin and Jessa each spoke about the motivation levels of other students in the classroom as well, particularly the students they identified as overachievers. When talking about the difference between external and internal motivation for his students, Benjamin thinks that some of the underachieving students are actually more internally motivated, and have “navigated or negotiated [the external factors] in such a way that it does not seem to be a prime motivator” (November 28, 2014). In this, he refers to the drive to get high grades, or the push from parents to put more effort into their work. In contrast, some of the overachievers are the ones who “are very focused around achievement, marks, being graded, being involved in everything, getting into a good university or high school program” (Benjamin, November 28, 2014). They are involved in activities outside of the school, and seem to be more influenced by their parents’ opinions of what they need to do and what their futures should look like. Jessa
agrees with this in her experience with her students, commenting that her overachievers “spend hours and hours on assignments to try to ensure that they achieve grades above 90%”, and that they “always seem to have other things going on, like piano lessons, language schools, sports, other school clubs” (December 8, 2014). In this depiction from these two teachers, it sets up a situation where the overachievers are more externally motivated, while the underachievers are internally motivated to simply do what is necessary, rather than go above and beyond the base expectations.

4.6.2 Student Goals

This question of how motivation influences the overachievers as compared to the underachievers prompts the issue of what the goals of these students are. For many of the overachievers mentioned, they have clear goals of wanting to attend specific high school or university programs, for which they think they need exceptional grades, and that drives their work in school. The underachievers, on the other hand, seem more driven to do enough to get by, rather than focusing on that higher level of accomplishment.

Benjamin talks further about how he feels these students “just refuse to do anything”, or are “just doing enough to get by all around” (November 28, 2014). These are the ones that are the largest achievement gaps, and have decided that they do not need to do as much work, but instead can spend their time doing what they want. While we talked previously about how many of the overachievers were the students who had busy lives outside of school with extracurricular activities, the underachievers stick out as students who spend their time hanging out with friends, playing video games, and doing what they want to do with their time outside of school. Jessa comments that her students are similar, and that part of it relates to the fact that they are designated as gifted, in that “they just know they will get an acceptable grade anyway, and
decide that they do not need to spend so much time on it” (December 8, 2014). For them, perhaps the goal is to get a B rather than to strive for an A+, so they decide to do just as much work as required to make that happen. Isabel notices that this becomes more pronounced for the grade eight students near the end of the school year, as she says “they start looking forward more and thinking that they don’t need to focus as much on their grade eight schoolwork” (January 12, 2015). The students have shifted goals, so that even some of the students who used to put more effort in to their work start to relax a bit on that front, as they know what they are going to be doing for high school.

In this area there is perhaps more of a need for balance among the students. The underachievers have minimal goals set to just get by and do what is needed, while the overachievers go so far above and beyond the expected work that they spend all their time on those assignments. Benjamin expressed concern that some of the students’ parents were coming in to him saying that their children did not have time for family activities due to the amount of work they were doing. Isabel also reported having “parents come in and tell [her] that their child was up until 1am finishing their lab report, when realistically, they went so far above and beyond the expectations” (January 12, 2015). In this area, the students may need a better understanding of the expectations and how much work is needed, and better ideas of self-regulation for the work they are putting in.

4.6.3 Procrastination

Procrastination tends to be a hot topic of concern among teachers at the intermediate grade levels. For these underachieving gifted students, procrastination is a topic that comes up with all of the interviewed teachers in how it affects their school performance. The three teachers each reported that their students have a tendency to leave their work until the last minute, with
Isabel describing the effect as how the students will “quickly scribble out answers at the end of class rather than spending their time wisely” (January 12, 2015). Benjamin expresses a similar concern, stating the students are “putting off work that is of a nature that they are given enough time to really develop their ideas” (November 28, 2014). Benjamin conducts his program in a manner that allows for a lot of independent work for the students, so that they can focus on their areas of interest and develop their work in a way they see fit, and then present it to the rest of their classmates at a set date. These larger projects, he says, are part of how he sees a gifted class working most to the benefit of the students, so that they are able to go as deep as they want into a particular subject and demonstrate the depth of their knowledge while staying within an area of the curriculum. However, he struggles with students who leave all of the work until the last minute, and end up with a subpar presentation of their work, even if it was a topic of their choosing from the start of the assignment. There is a challenge with the procrastination issue where students think they can do the work well enough in that short period, but as Benjamin states, do not end up really developing their ideas to an extent that shows that high level of achievement he is looking for in the class.

All of these issues surrounding motivation come together to add to the challenge of underachievement in the classroom, as the students are sometimes uninterested in putting forth further effort to take their work to that next level. Each of the teachers expressed their disappointment in the work, and frustration at not being able to motivate their students to produce work of a higher quality, relating this challenge each time back to the students’ level of motivation inside and outside of the classroom.
4.7 Underachievement as Compared to Selective Achievement

As discussed in the literature review section of this paper, selective achievement refers to students who succeed at certain subject areas or topics but not others. These are the students who will put forth the effort if a topic interests them, but will achieve lower grades in areas that do not manage to hold their attention. When looking at underachievement in gifted students, it is important to differentiate between these two types of achievement, and to acknowledge as a teacher that the approaches towards helping these students will differ.

4.7.1 Selective Achievement

Benjamin and Isabel both mentioned having selective achievers in their classes, while Jessa had not noticed a particular difference in this area. For Benjamin, he said that he mainly noticed it in relation to a dichotomy between science/math as compared to language. In speaking about this area, he noted that he “see[s] those kids that are like, they will do their science, they will do their math, and it will be to whatever specifications, but then the language it is like ‘oh wow, you could really develop this idea here’” (November 28, 2014). For Isabel, as a rotary Science teacher, she noticed some fluctuation between topics that the students were interested in, but mainly it was a comparison to what other teachers noticed in their classes. Much of this focus seems related to how the students are able to express their ideas, and the amount of detail that they go into in the assessment format. There may be a question of whether these students are selective achievers, or whether they put the same amount of work into each subject but find that certain subjects are easier than others and thus attain higher grade levels.
4.7.2 Assessment as Achievement

Some of this debate comes down to the issue of how assessment is done in each of the subject areas. As Benjamin mentioned earlier, he has students who excel in Science and Mathematics when they have to provide straight answers, but struggle when they have to elaborate further in Language courses. He goes on to say that “whether they are communicating like if it is a Math test for example, or it is a Science task that does not involve a lot of writing, I can assess it not based on the communication part of it, they seem to do better” (November 28, 2014). The method of assessment affects their ability to do well, potentially because the assessments that require more communication also require more effort on the part of the students.

While I am keen to distinguish between selective achievers and underachievers, I think in this case it can be important to note that some students that appear as selective achievers in the gifted programs may actually be underachievers. They may only appear as selective achievers because their abilities are high enough to do well in those certain areas without having to put forth as much effort as they may have to in other subjects. This is an important note when it comes to how to address the issue of their achievement level, and what techniques are most effective. For true selective achievers, trying to create tasks that are more engaging and authentic may have more success than they do with students who are underachievers.

4.8 Commonalities among Underachieving Students

When talking to these teachers about their underachieving students, each of them had some startlingly similar things to say about these students in relation to their interests, their reactions to expectations, and their gender. Here we will take a look at each of these areas and what their teachers have had to say about what they have noticed about these students.
4.8.1 Expectations

Expectations for gifted students tend to be high. Benjamin and Isabel both talked about the importance of the students taking on leadership roles within the school, and the pressures that they can experience from their teachers to be role models among the school community and to show more initiative in their work. Benjamin talks about the other expectations facing his gifted students, talking about how there are “the expectations for them to do well academically and socially, the leadership piece, they needed to produce at a certain level to please parents, things like that” and how “their parents are pushing them for that last 5% or whatever” (November 28, 2014). While this is not the case for all of the students, most of them face high levels of expectations from multiple areas in their lives. Some of them use these expectations as an external source of motivation, and, as discussed earlier, lean towards the overachieving side of the spectrum in an attempt to accomplish everything they are told they should be doing. For these overachievers, Isabel thinks there might be a further issue, in that:

I think that maybe they’re used to having such high expectations set for them that they don’t know how they would cope if they did not do that well, or they are worried about what their parents would think...they are already burdened with so much, it should not be such a surprise that some of them decide to just check out and take a break from all of these pressures that we are constantly placing on them (January 12, 2015)

Jessa also explains that she feels that some of the underachievers “do not seem to feel the same pressures to excel in their subjects as the overachievers do” (December 8, 2014). Many of these comments fall under the same line of thinking, that the underachieving students certainly have the capabilities to do better (as evidenced by the concept of the achievement gap in the first case), but are likely purposefully choosing not to put in the effort required to do so. These students may not value their grades as highly as others, or think that they are actually a reflection of how they perform as students or what they are capable of. When there are so many other
external pressures being placed upon the students, let alone the gifted label itself, they choose to instead just do what is required and opt not to go any further than necessary.

### 4.8.2 Students’ Gender

Both Benjamin and Jessa commented on gender commonalities among their underachieving students when prompted on what similarities they noticed with their students. Benjamin explained that he has “tended to notice that it is more of the boys who fall in the underachievers category, and more of the girls who fall into the overachievers category” (November 28, 2014), while Jessa said, similarly, “the girls are more likely to be the overachievers while the boys are more likely to be the underachievers” (December 8, 2014).

When asked why they thought this might be the case, neither were very sure about what could lead to that discrepancy. Benjamin suggested that the process of getting tested for the gifted program itself could contribute to the issue, as male students are more likely to get tested because when they are not challenged in the younger grades they can be more rambunctious. In contrast, the female students who are noticed are the ones who put in the extra effort and stick out as having done exceptional work. While this is simply his conjecture on the topic, it provides an avenue of thought about how this affects our students and the testing of students for the program.

### 4.9 Findings Conclusion

Each of the teachers interviewed for this research study provided valuable insights into their classrooms and their experiences with gifted learners. Through investigating these main themes in the presentation of underachievement, teacher strategies, the link to motivation, the difference between under- and selective achievement, and finally the traits shared between
students identified as underachieving, these teachers shared useful information about the shaping of their experiences. While this chapter focused on presenting their experiences faithfully, the next chapter will continue on to a discussion about how their perspectives fit in with the literature mentioned in chapter two, as well as where this research can be further expanded to develop these ideas more. I would again like to acknowledge these teachers for their participation and honesty in sharing their experiences for this study.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Throughout this study, there have been a few main questions driving the research, focused around how we can improve the experiences of underachieving students in the gifted classroom, and how motivation affects their performance. From the interviews with the teachers described in the previous chapter on findings, there are three main points I will elaborate on further in relation to the literature. These have to do with Addressing Underachievement, Motivation and Student Goals, and Selective Achievement. Following these points, I will address the implications of this study and recommendations for moving forward, the limitations, and avenues for further study on this topic.

5.1 Discussion
5.1.1 Addressing Underachievement

Each of the teachers interviewed talked about working to increase student engagement through authentic, meaningful work that was challenging enough to keep their interest. This aligns with the research done in my literature review, particularly with Siegle’s (2013) work on the topic as well Rakow (2011) and VanTassel-Baska and Brown (2007). They experienced minimal results with the students who were underachieving in their classes, which compares with Emerick’s (2004) statement that “interventions reported by researchers have failed or have had limited success” (p. 106). As Benjamin, Jessa, and Isabel were all trying the same types of standard interventions, they also had challenges in finding success with the work. However, Benjamin was the only one who addressed self-driven learning with his students, in the longer projects that they would decide topics for and create their own presentations about. While he was still met with challenges in this style of assignment, commenting that students too often left the
work until the last minute; he found that the students were more engaged when they were actually working on it than they were in other assignments. Morisano and Shore (2010) talk about the benefits of students being able to set their own goals, and perhaps what is needed for Benjamin’s assignment is a more developed goal-setting process with the students. In an attempt to avoid the procrastination issue, he could work with the students to define their own goals and provide check-in points, to encourage accountability and give them more of a voice in the work that they are doing. It is in this area that I think the more promising work was done in regards to trying to address underachievement, as more of the standard suggestions of increasing the level of challenge and engagement have fallen flat for most of these teachers.

5.1.2 Motivation and Student Goals

The research done with these teachers shows that their attempts at motivating their students through altering the work provided had limited success, and brings up the question of what the students are motivated towards doing. In this case, it would seem that many of these students are motivated to do work, but only enough work that will get them grades that show that they met the basic requirements of the assignments or tests. These students appear internally motivated to achieve grades that teachers would typically consider good grades for non-gifted students, showing that they are meeting the curriculum expectations. The problem is that because these students are able to achieve more, the teachers expect them to live up to this ability, when the students are reluctant to put in more work than is required.

This brings us to the issue of what the goals are of these students. Many of them seem to have a goal of passing the grade they are in, and being able to spend their free time how they wish. In which case, their achievement is right at the level they want it to be. It is only because of the expectations for these students that they are expected to be above that. When discussing
shared characteristics of underachieving students in the literature review, I constructed a table of traits mentioned in a few different sources from my research. The traits included that most often came up through these interviews were low self-motivation, low effort toward academic tasks, low goal valuation, parental expectations and values, and excessive pressure to succeed and perfectionism (Siegle, 2013; Rakow, 2011; Morisano & Shore, 2010; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Clemons, 2008). Low self-motivation was the only trait mentioned in all five of the studies referenced. I have come to think, however, that the assessment of low self-motivation is tied to the other factors, rather than being a factor on its own. If a student has low goal valuation, and does not value what they are doing academically, then that will manifest as low self-motivation due to the lack of effort they put forth (low effort toward academic tasks). All three of the interviewees discussed how the underachieving students had “checked out”, “zoned out” or were otherwise ignoring the pressures from their parents and the rest of their teachers, as well as the gifted label itself. This, again, manifests in the students as low self-motivation, for all appearances to their teachers, as they have no interest in rising to these expectations or caving to these pressures.

Perhaps the focus needs to be on including more goal setting opportunities in the classroom for these students. Emerick (2004) argues for this himself, suggesting that academic goals are one of the factors that students identify “as having a positive impact on their academic performance” (p. 115). With an understanding of what the students’ goals are, teachers will be better equipped to help them reach that level. If the student states that their goals are simply to pass the grade and continue in school, further work needs to be done evaluating why they do not have higher goals, or thinking about what they want to achieve later in their life and what the steps to get there will be. Many of the students that the teachers identified as overachievers in
this study were the ones who had clear and distinct goals for the future, which were driving them in their academics at this level. Perhaps more focus on goal setting would benefit both of these groups, in understanding how much work they needed to put forward, but also in looking at the benefits of having time off, resting, and getting enough sleep so that they can function at a higher level the next day (this, mainly, being directed towards the overachieving students of the group).

5.1.3 Selective Achievement

I find myself returning to the idea of selective achievement for a number of reasons. Some of the teachers interviewed were hesitant to refer to their students as underachievers for this study, instead wanting to say that they were selectively achieving, because they sometimes produced higher quality work, even though they were not putting in more effort for it. One of the challenges with gifted students in this area is that they can achieve higher quality work without putting that effort in; they start thinking that they do not need to put in the effort, as some of the teachers referenced, because they know they will get acceptable marks. This is very different from the actual definition of what is meant when we talk about selective achievement.

In this case, the selective achievers would be those who are very intrinsically motivated to do well in specific subjects, or in certain areas that interest them (Hebert & Shreiber, 2010). It is not enough to say that they do well in these subjects, but rather that they consistently display high motivation to do well in them; they put forth the effort in these areas because they are interested in them. In contrast, the students who are underachievers but occasionally do well on an assignment or test, tend to do well on that assessment because they could do so without putting in any effort. This was an important distinction when talking to these teachers about their students, as the focus was on the students who lacked the motivation to try to achieve at the expected level in any of their subject areas.
Through this research, I have noticed that many of the traditional suggestions for increasing motivation (such as making the work more engaging, more meaningful, more authentic, more challenging, etc.) are based around the idea that the students not doing well are selective achievers. They are only doing poorly because they are not interested in what the work is. For underachievers, however, the focus needs to be more on the reasons why they are not doing well in all areas, and understanding what is needed so that they can move forward and put forth more effort into their work, and to be motivated to actually care about putting that effort in.

5.2 Implications

For myself, as a teacher, this research has caused me to rethink the way I approach student achievement in the classroom. My mentality prior to this was that if my lessons were engaging and authentic enough, my students would be interested and would do the work needed so that they did well. Which, yes, will work for many students who are disenchanted with school for those related reasons, but those are not the reasons for all students to not live up to their potential. Realistically, we need to talk more in our pre-service teacher education about opening up a dialogue with our students, and finding out what their goals are and what they are hoping to get out of their education. Many of them likely have not thought about that, and these might be the students the teachers in this study are talking about.

In my practice, I would like to explore goal valuation as a concept with my students, and the purpose of setting goals and understanding where they are headed. Pre-service teacher education addresses the importance of the students knowing the purpose of why they do what they do in the classroom, but I would like to place more emphasis in helping them define that purpose for themselves, and understand what is important to them. While this research was focused on gifted education and the role of motivation for the intermediate years, I think
exploring goal valuation is something that can be done with all students to help them have a more concrete vision of what they are doing in the classroom and why it will be important to them in the future.

5.3 Limitations

This study was a smaller-scale qualitative study, bringing with it a few inherent limitations. First, there were only three participants involved, one of whom was only in his first year teaching in a gifted classroom. Due to the nature of the study as being teacher focused, there was not an opportunity to explore implementing some of these suggestions regarding goal-setting to see how they would work in the classroom, it was merely an analysis of current trends and evaluation of what successes the teachers have met with in this area. There was also a geographic limitation in that the teachers are all from Southern Ontario, restricting this study to the area, though I do feel that the results from it can be generalized to a wider audience than this one region.

5.4 Further Study

One of the main questions that came to mind through many of these interviews and through the writing process has been what the students’ perspectives would have been on these questions. Do the students see themselves as motivated? Do they see themselves as bucking pressures from their parents and the wider community? How would they respond to the questions that I posed to their teachers? More student-centered research on this issue could help expand the understanding of the role motivation plays for these students, and whether it is actually a question of engagement or one of their valuation of academics.
As mentioned in previous sections, I also think it would be of great benefit to enact some longer-range studies regarding the effectiveness of goal setting in the intermediate gifted classroom. Working with students on establishing what their goals are for different lengths of time, and getting into the practice of setting goals, as an aim towards increasing achievement levels of these students. This would also require a more student-centered interview approach, through more qualitative research, potentially in a specific classroom with a range of student ability levels.

5.5 Conclusion

Through the process of writing this paper, I have sought to investigate the role that motivation plays in underachieving students in the intermediate gifted classroom. While I still believe that motivation plays a part, I think that the part it plays is secondary towards other questions about what the students’ goals are and what they aim to achieve through the work they are doing. While we, as teachers, should still be striving to make our lessons engaging, authentic, and meaningful to our students, I believe that we also need to consider what is important to our students, and how we can help them in their own goals and challenges. In this way, we can help them see the relevance of what they are doing in our classrooms to what they want to achieve, and encourage them along their own pathways, with our roles as their facilitators. We need to help them achieve what they want and what they value, rather than insisting that their accomplishments should be ones that we chose.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A – LETTER OF CONSENT FOR INTERVIEW

Date: ____________________________

Dear ____________________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching student. I am studying motivation issues and the achievement gap in gifted students at the intermediate level. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 30-minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you, outside of school time.

The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as an informal presentation to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Samantha Hayward
samantha.hayward@mail.utoronto.ca

Instructor’s Name: _________________________
Phone number: ____________________________
APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Samantha Hayward and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): ___________________________________

Date: ______________________
APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

1. Are you familiar with the concept of an achievement gap?
   a. Provide definition if required: disparity between expected and actual achievement

2. What are your opinions on the achievement gap among gifted/high-achieving students?
   a. Have you noticed an achievement gap in your gifted education classrooms?
   b. Is the achievement gap more noticeable in certain grades? Which grades?

3. Have you ever received recommendations from other educators in addressing underachieving students?
   a. What recommendations have you received?
   b. Have you found these recommendations applicable in your practice as a teacher?
   c. Do these recommendations differ based on whether the students are gifted? If yes, how do they differ?

4. What steps do you take to address underachieving gifted students?
   a. Are there any commonalities you have noticed amongst underachieving gifted students?

5. What motivation issues (if any) have you noticed with these underachieving students?
   a. How would you describe their motivation levels in the classroom?
b. How would you describe their motivation levels outside the classroom (if applicable)?

6. How do you address low motivation levels in your classroom, gifted or non-gifted?
   a. Does this differ based on whether the students are gifted?

7. What recommendations would you have for other educators of gifted students struggling with underachievement in their classrooms?
APPENDIX D – DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Total number of years teaching: ______________

2. Please circle which of the intermediate grades you have taught, and write down how many years you taught each grade:

   7: _________
   8: _________

3. Please circle the grades for which you have taught gifted education classes, and write down how many years you taught gifted education classes for each of the intermediate grades:

   7: _________
   8: _________

4. Have you taught gifted education classes at any other grades? If so, please indicate which grades and for how many years:

   ____________________________________________________________