LOST POTENTIAL: WHEN GIFTED BOYS UNDERACHIEVE

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Abstract

While the prevalence of high school students failing classes is a long standing problem, the issue of highly intelligent male students who choose to fail is an important red flag in the educational system, and needs to be addressed. This lost potential of innovation and problem solving intelligence is not something that schools or society can continue to allow. This study provides insight into the perceptions and realities of gifted male students who have received a C or lower in classes where content mastery was not an issue. Themes that emerged within the study include how teacher attitude and decisions impact success, how various tasks and activities are viewed by this population, and the impact of peers for highly capable males in high school. A review of the literature shows how several obstacles work against gifted boys in our schools, and how those obstacles create students who choose to fail. During their education, the gifted male student face four main complications: the biological natures of being male, the issues specific to being gifted/highly intelligent, the constraints of inflexible curriculum and school structures, and being misunderstood by teachers. Though complete school reform is a slowly emerging process, smaller, possible, immediate change can make a difference and see these students to their full potential. This study provides insight for teachers and administrators as to what changes can be made in classes to engage this population.

Keywords: Male, Underachiever, Failure, Gifted, Non-producer
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

As schools are moving forward with post NCLB reform and programs, there is a subset of students on which it is important to devote research and resources. While overall high school dropout statistics have shown a recent slight improvement nationwide, the data show that male drop outs outnumber female ones, and students with high intellectual ability are leaving school before graduation (US Department of Education, 2011) which is cause for concern. Highly intellectual students have the capacity to become great thinkers and leaders, but some are disengaging or dropping out of schools across the nation. Of total drop outs, up to 20% who leave school prior to graduation are considered “gifted” or intellectually very high functioning (Robertson, 1991). Students exiting traditional high school before graduation is a widespread problem that has the attention of school officials and researchers, but it is important to guide some focus to the subset of those who exhibit high level problem solving and advanced thinking (Landis & Reschly, 2013). In addition to traditional drop outs, highly intelligent students leaving traditional models to either alternative education or drop out status may need to be seen as a different problem, with different issues, and with possibly different consequences for society. While students who drop out or just barely graduate often fail to hold as productive a place in the economy as they should, highly intellectual students who underachieve or drop out take with them the potential to find a place as important members of society, and can create a void in the country’s problem solving communities.

An additional layer within the school disengagement and drop out information is that of gender. Journals have published many studies and statistics detailing a “boy crisis” as it is being called, as researchers separate the achievement between male and female students. With results
like “Boys earn 70 percent of Ds and Fs” (Gurian, 2004) and new brain research that shows just how differently biological gender can impact learning (Stoltzer, 2008) researchers are beginning to find the unintended consequences of the “Feminization of schools” which happened after 1990 (Kleinfeld, 2009; Slotzer, 2008; Voyer & Voyer, 2014). In realizing the needs of a male’s brain and comparing them to traditional and common classroom practices it becomes clear why boys struggle.

It is important to find ways to make school a place that inspires learning, and holds engagement for all. When the learning preferences and typical characteristics of highly capable and gifted students are coupled with the biological needs and realities of most males, it can lead to a type of student that can sometimes struggle to find success in today’s schools (Kerr & Multon, 2015). Some of our brightest male minds are frustrated, have “checked out” of lessons, and are underachieving in their high school classes.

A Shift in Research

Research efforts on student underachievement and drop outs often focus on those who struggle with reading or math, or who have unfortunate circumstances that make school too difficult. Studies have only recently begun to recognize the subgroup of students who can make it to graduation, but are decidedly choosing not to (Hebert & Schreiber, 2010). Of those studies, many show that male students face different issues than female students making them more likely to fail out of school, regardless of their intellect, with some studies putting the male to female drop out ratio at 3:1 (Matthews, 2006; Stoltzer, 2008). Research is starting to uncover the reasons why our brightest male minds chose to abandon classrooms where having a bright mind is supposed to be an advantage. Curriculum pacing and teacher attitudes can lead to failure among gifted male students, and studies have found that male students who fall into the category
of “gifted” sometimes begin their disconnection from school at a very early age (Figg, Rogers, McCormick & Low, 2012; Hansen and Toso, 2007). Current pedagogy and school culture has created a place where conformity and the absorption of knowledge is valued over problem solving and the creation of knowledge (Slotzer, 2008; Weins, 2006). Further research is needed to pinpoint how this effects students who do not conform, and prefer to solve and create.

**Significance of the Study**

The U.S. has been transformed from a manufacturing-based economy to an economy based on knowledge, and the importance of a college education today can be compared to that of a high school education forty years ago. It serves as the gateway to better options and more opportunity (Collegeview.com).

Success in high school classes is a significant part of the college acceptance process, so when highly capable students do poorly, they are limiting their college opportunities, and in turn limiting their future opportunities. The purpose of my research is to find out how highly intellectual students who underachieve feel about the factors that impacted their educational experience. Some prior studies have shown the main factors to be within the area of curriculum pacing, presentation and teacher relationships (Blass, 2014; Figg et al, 2012; Gentry, 2006). Initial research points to rigid structures and simplistic curriculum as part of the reason that gifted students become frustrated with school (Figg et al, 2012; McCoach & Siegle, 2002), so research in this area can help build school structures that work towards flexibility and depth of knowledge requirements. Within a qualitative study, I hope to explore these ideas further to see if students discuss curriculum and presentation, and if they can identify how classes could have been adjusted to help them be more successful. With this insight, it is my hope that teachers and curriculum leaders can more easily recognize when highly capable students are not being served,
and how adjustments in curriculum can help the students fulfil their potential. Teachers, parents, and schools should consider the frustration of students walking away, and begin to see what changes need to be made to invite them back to the classroom.

**Significance of the Problem and Who to Study**

If any highly intellectual boys become disenfranchised with the system and remove themselves from classroom discourse, they take with them deep analysis of topics, and intellectual rhetoric (Kim, 2008). These students add depth and insight into class discussions by sometimes adding a layer of challenge, as they often do not accept information at face value, and tend to challenge assumptions and presented curriculum (McCoach & Siegle, 2002). While this challenge is beneficial to overall content coverage, in that it promotes discussion, this challenge can sometimes create discomfort for teachers. Highly intellectual students find frustration in a system that rewards conformity with teachers who are unwilling to explore new angles or approaches to content. If these students become frustrated enough, they exit prior to graduation to find places where they feel valued (Klienfeld, 2009). The larger problem at hand is that these self-confident, analytical thinkers do not always fulfil their potential in careers and positions where they can help serve communities with their knowledge and skills. The doors that lead to influential positions within business, science, and most other impactful occupations in our nation rely upon college entrance, and networking with those who work within standard expectations of work ethic (McCoach & Siegle, 2002).

**Research Questions**

Difficulty with mastering content is typically not a problem with highly intellectual students, yet some are earning low grades, failing classes, and even dropping out of school. In order to understand why, we must ask how these students perceive their experiences within
heterogeneous high school classes in relation to their academic success. Can we find out what they are not being offered that causes them to disengage from their classes? If so, what strategies and practices could teachers employ that would keep these students engaged? The following questions seek to create insight into this problem:

1. How do those identified as highly capable male students who are considered academically underachieving describe the classroom environment, curriculum, pedagogy and student-teacher relationships in relation to their lack of academic performance?

2. What do identified highly capable males student believe would greatly increase their academic engagement in the classroom?

Positionality Statement

I have been in education for over twenty years, and it seems to me that there is no shortage of ongoing concerns and issues on which any researcher could focus. As a high school English teacher in an upper middle class, suburban district, I am somewhat shielded from some of the big problems facing today’s low performing schools. Many students who come through my door are ready to learn, and have high aspirations for the future. When Alex came through my door in 2005, however, he created an awareness in me that has since continued to grow. Alex was the most intelligent student and profound writer I have met; however, he not only failed my English class, but dropped out of school and got a GED. I was stunned. Two years later I met Kirk. Kirk reads and analyzes classic novels with the skill of a professor, but has never gotten above a C- in English. Last year, it was Brian. Brian writes his own blog which has some of the most in-depth, insightful reflections I have come across, but he confessed to me that he almost dropped out of school out of boredom and frustration. There are new boys
each year who fit this profile. As I talk to colleagues, they all seem to have similar stories. As I talk to friends, they relay examples from their lives. As I meet strangers at dinner parties, they nod and tell me they know the story. They speak of brothers, sons, and even themselves as they describe being highly intellectual, and totally disenfranchised with school as an institution.

It may seem at odds to be a researcher focused on males who are not engaged in school. I am not male, and as both a teacher and a doctoral student, I highly value education. As a reflective teacher, however, these boys have made me wonder if there is more that we can do to engage students that fit this particular profile.

As a researcher, it is important for me to recognize that I believe that some of their choices are valid. When I listen to the stories, and I meet the students, I struggle to place all of the blame on them for their low and failing grades. The more I read about the topic, the more I become biased. I see what research shows is best for males and highly intellectual students and I am frustrated when I see that is not always what drives curriculum and class culture. I am biased in that I believe the needs of these particular students are being ignored in the name of logistics, easier master scheduling, and teacher centered classes. I believe it is the system that needs to adjust, not the learning preferences of the students who are being expected to conform to rigid pacing and standardized grouping across our schools. I do not place blame on the students, but instead on the institution.

Knowing my bias is on the side of the student, as I complete and analyze research, I need to be open to all the targets for shared blame. Asking open ended questions of students will allow me to hear various scenarios and reasons for the underachievement of my target population, both school centered and not. As I ask and record answers, being aware of my biases, and analyzing all of the factors that the students discuss is important for my research.
The studies I have read discuss curriculum and teacher action as major factors in the failure of these boys, but my study is to uncover the lived experiences of my participants, and listen for all the factors they describe. As I analyses responses, all themes that present themselves must be considered and given their due attention.

**Theoretical Framework**

When embarking on a literature review on intellectual males who fail classes or drop out of school, one can find a great deal of information on underachievement, low performing students, and motivation. While all of these terms technically describe underachieving students, within Figg, Rogers, McCormick & Low’s 2012 article on “Differentiating Low Performance of the Gifted Learner” was a theory that is a better fit. The authors write about the concept of “selective consumers” which originated in the seminal work of James Delisle. This theory seemed to perfectly incorporate a different label used to describe who these students are. Differentiating between the typical underachieving student, those that are functioning below their potential for various reasons, and a selective consumer, a student who is not doing well specifically due to their “academic self-perception and thinking style preference” (Figg et al, 2012) is important. The words “selective consumer” encompass what I see in the classroom, and in the boys that I have met. It describes highly capable males who pick and choose which assignments they are interested in completing, and ignore the rest regardless of the consequence. According to the theory, in terms of the “academic self-perception” of this population, they feel insulted by assignments which are considered below their knowledge level (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). These students seem to take it upon themselves to determine what they should and should not do and learn.
The term selective consumer was a theory introduced in 1992 and describes students as ones who “know that school is not the only place where learning occurs and will not conform to ‘playing the game’ for the sake of pleasing others” (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, pp. 175-176). Figg et al cite four studies previous to theirs that verified the difference between those that underachieve, and those that selectively consume curriculum, though they are the first to try and verify quantitatively. While many variables and angles are presented in the studies, it is the academic self-perception, and the subsequent findings of the “Five Cs” from Figg and his co-researchers that I plan to focus as the main tenants of my research.

The five Cs. The five “C”s of Kanevesky and Keighley’s 2003 research: challenge, control, complexity, choice and caring, are based on Delisle’s theory, and significantly contributed to in the Figg et al study. Selective consumers were found to have higher rates of engagement and achievement when the five “C”s worked in their favor. Kanevesky and Keighley’s findings offer very specific language and create categories in which I can root my questions, and help to categorize themes that present themselves in student responses.

Delisle’s earlier research found that lessons that offered no challenge for gifted students are the most frequently noted cause of disengagement. Studies continue to find that repetition of tasks, frequent reviewing of information, and rote memorization which come easily to highly intellectual students creates frustration for them, and can cause them to dislike classes (Hansen & Toso, 2007; McCoach & Siegle, 2002).

In addition to challenging curriculum, studies under Delisle’s theory found that both control and choice were factors that influenced the level of engagement from highly capable students in their classes (Figg et al, 2012; Gerber, Rayneri & Wiley, 2003; Kanevsky &
Keighley, 2003). These researchers found that students who chose to ignore tasks and assignments were often not satisfied with the teacher directed lessons and felt that to do tasks related to content they already knew was to jump through “hoops.” As one participant put it they prefer to “create their own hoops” (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003).

Lack of complexity within curriculum or tasks is also noted within research about selective achieving intellectual students. Like challenge, complex lessons that stimulate higher level thinking are key to maintain the interest of this population (Figg et al, 2012; Gentry, 2006; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003). Within these studies, intellectual students used words like “messy,” “level thinking,” and “abstract” to describe complex lessons that kept them involved and on task within the lesson. Worksheets, memorization and text book work were touted as simple, and “beneath them” (Gentry, 2006).

Challenge, control, choice, and complexity are all broad concepts that can help organize and categorize student responses and feelings about the content and pedagogy offered to them within school. The last “C” identified by Kanevsky and Keighley is caring - specifically the caring nature of teachers. Within their 2003 study, caring was presented as the most powerful of the five Cs. It has been suggested that a caring, fair, and understanding teacher can overcome other shortcomings in a class, and provide motivation for otherwise non-producing intellectual students (English & Kitsantas, 2013; Hansen & Toso, 2007; Kanevsky & Keighely, 2003; Lessard, Butlder-Kisber, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin & Royer, 2008). This last category provides a space for interpretation of responses less related to what is presented in the class, and more towards who is doing the presenting.
Summary

Gender, intellectual ability and a myriad of other factors play into underachievement statistics in today’s schools. Intelligent, male students are a sub-population of underachievement that could benefit from more exploration. Personal teaching experience, anecdotal stories from students, and my research thus far tells me that there are often issues within the perception of the content, teachers, and assignments when highly capable boys fail. While research supports that problems for these boys start in the early years of school, my focus is on high school age males who have been identified as highly intellectual at some point in their history. My plan is to create a qualitative study in which I first survey a large sample of students who fit the profile and then create focus groups to allow those who volunteer to describe their experiences. Using recent theories based on seminal work identifying the existence of selective consumer, I will frame my research and instruments by looking at academic self-perception, intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation, and perceived value and experience with challenge, control, complexity, choice and caring. My hope is to create insight for educators as we change our curriculum to Common Core so we can fold the needs of this specific group into our current reform efforts.
Chapter II: Literature Review

As much as equality, potential, and diversity are touted in the United States, the culture of education does not promote creativity or individual achievement among highly intellectual students (English & Kitsantas, 2013). Since the 1990s, success in schools has increasingly been linked to following directions over learning in that school cultures consistently reward conformity, and compliance when it comes to curriculum and classwork (Fazzarro, 2012; Kleinfeld, 2009). Highly intelligent male students have biological and social-emotional factors that can sometimes go against a culture of conformity. This population of students can fall into a difficult cycle of fighting against the rigid, sequential information that the system offers, and face possibly being misunderstood by their teachers and schools (Brown, 1993; Gentry, 2006).

Students with unimpressive high school success, or those who have not earned a high school diploma can become a drain on society, but for this population, that concern is secondary (Blaas, 2014). While underachievement is not uncommon among students, “underachievement seems especially troubling when it is manifested by our brightest students – the gifted” (Gerber, Rayneri & Wiley, p.1). Allowing the potential innovations and problem solving abilities of these students to escape future opportunities to help society is something that needs attention. Within education reform, schools should strive to understand the needs of these students, and create flexibility within curriculum in order to push them forward and upward.

To research the phenomenon of highly capable male students choosing to fail classes and dropping out is an exercise in researching the history of education itself. To look all the way back at the roots of our educational system, one immediately sees the early structures that put this population at risk. Throughout the decades, expert opinions have warned educators and
schools of shortcomings presented in the systems being created, but warnings and realities have been ignored.

Researchers struggle to pinpoint exactly how many highly intellectual students decide to leave before graduation. A 1991 study estimated that 18-25% of gifted students drop out of high school (Robertson). The numbers are higher when it comes to the simple underachievement of the highly capable, or failure to demonstrate academic performance that is equal to potential. Blass (2014) contends that “all studies found underachievement in gifted students, some up to 63%” (p. 244). Other studies found that over half of these students do not achieve to capacity, and boys earn up to 70% of the failing grades in middle school and high school classes (Kim 2008, Wiens, 2006). Studies have found boys are four times less likely to do homework and that they come prepared to school and that boys have a significantly higher rate of high test scores, but low course grades (Kleinfeld 2009; Weins 2006).

The problems facing male students do not get the same attention or solutions that have been afforded other groups when found to be in trouble. In the 1990s, there was an outcry regarding the inequities facing female students, and the country moved quickly with new programs and mandates to level the playing field to ensure success for female students. Since then, the gap has reversed. Kleinfeild (2009) found that even though significant studies have come forward to show how boys are being failed by our schools in droves, no swift action has followed, and no media outrage has come over the loss of boys from high schools and colleges. Current data collection reports that the grades, GPA and college admittance are now consistently and strikingly in favor of female students. In 2007, enrollment in the National Honor Society, a recognition and service club for high ranking high school students, was 69% female and 36%
male (Kleinfeild, 2009). Data shows that the strategies introduced in the 1990s worked – girls have been able to move ahead, and find more success in education. Boys are being left behind.

Up until the 1990s, researchers created lists of possible factors that predict school failure and compiled data on who fails, but this inherently missed the highly intellectual student as those choosing to fail despite their high intelligence level (Lee & Burkham, 2012). In past quantitative studies, students were not asked the qualitative “why.” According to one article, even as recently as 2009, researchers knew many of the factors and characteristics of a typical failing student, but knew little about the causal factors (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The tendency towards quantitative studies, and the inability of those data sets to accurately distinguish “underachievers” from these “selective achievers” kept the mystery of these failures in the category of anomaly, and their information has been missed (Figg et al, 2003).

An increase in the prevalence of qualitative studies has begun to introduce the educational field to the reality that some of the smartest and most innovative students are failing classes, leaving schools, and becoming burdens on society. Researchers are saying that qualitative inquiry, and the studies investigating the role of school culture in the decision to fail and drop out are just beginning (Lee & Burkham, 2012). The hurdle of convincing schools that they are at fault for what historically has been a very individual place for blame is a tremendous one, and will take many more years to fully come to fruition.

Reviewing the literature on highly intellectual males who are underachieving finds that research on these particular students is not widely done. This paper will first examine the biological predispositions that are mismatched to current school structure, define what an intellectual male student is, and then discuss the curriculum, school structures, and teacher issues that lead to the failure of these students.
Being Male

One of the factors creating some issues for male underachieving intellectual students when it comes to school is a biological one. While it is not true of all boys, and certainly is true of some girls, the general consensus is that boys are active, rowdy, and perpetually “doing.” Decades of brain research shows that male brains take in information and process it differently than female brains, and active participation is a big part of that (Stolzer, 2008). The change in strategies has cause the unintended consequence that schools have been feminized, making it more difficult for boys to be successful (Wein, 2006). Curriculum today requires sitting, not doing; reading, not exploring; and passively listening, not experiencing. Many boys are not biologically built for the current school model.

Advances in technology and the medical field continue to offer insight into why boys are struggling in school at such alarming rates. Stoltzer (2008) adds an evolutionary lens to the conversation, and reports that males have spent millennia perfecting their “maleness” which includes more intense activity levels, more aggressive learning styles and more need to explore the world around them. Stoltzer reminds us that while all of this about boys is proven, the “female way of learning” has become the gold standard in public schools. “Those that deviate are assumed to be developmentally delayed, behaviorally disordered or learning disabled” (p.82).

Over 100 differences in brain mapping and biological tendencies have been discovered in the study of gender differences (Wein, 2006). Female students, as a general rule, learn better through hearing and reading than through moving and doing. Evolutionary information tells us that male and female ear canals are different lengths, leading to girls being better listeners, especially to female voices, which is important because females make up 75% of most teaching staff (Wein, 2006). When placed side by side in a classroom, the girls present a more compliant,
attentive students than the boys, based on biological factors leading to the adherence to the expectations of school culture.

The Early Years

The trend of starting formal school at a younger age, and pushing more academic expectations on the first years has created a difficult set of circumstances for the biological realities of many male students. Boys, especially ages 2-7, are not experts at sitting still, and often prefer to learn with their hands preferring to touch things, and experience them (Green-Burton, 2012). For students who finish class work before the others around them (some of whom later are labeled as gifted) the extra time is often used differently by males. It has been found that biologically boys have fewer calming hormones, leading to the inability to remain still and inactive, so a boy who has free time in a classroom full of interesting objects is more at risk for getting in trouble for exploring, instead of patiently waiting, than many girl students in the same class (Green-Burton, 2012). This biologically inept impulse control can lead to the poor teacher relationship cycles in the early years of school.

Researchers and educators are beginning to recognize that boys and girls are in fact different, and that steps must be taken to ensure success for all. New ideas are starting to come forward for working with boys as they start their school careers. Leonard Sax, psychologist and pediatrician, in his book Boys Adrift, talks of schools who have initiated either all male Kindergarten, or “standing optional” Kindergartens to alleviate some of the biological issues of sitting still for boys. Some companies are even targeting teachers with information about using exercise balls in their rooms instead of chairs, and are designing desks with pedals which allow for more body movement as students study.
Boy Culture

Some boy students, particularly those identified as highly intellectual, are also up against gender stereotypes both actual and perceived. To be a boy, to some, means that you are not sensitive, you are not introspective and sometimes even that you are not smart (Green-Burton, 2012). Boys may even underachieve on purpose as a way to establish their masculinity and strength to their peers (Kerr & Multon, 2015; Merrotsy, 2013). The “boy code” as it is understood directly contradicts what gifted males feel as they approach their school work, and this contradiction can lead to frustration. Historically, frustration for boys, more often than girls, leads to aggression (Lessard et al., 2008). By middle school, data show that boys are more disengaged, have more conflict with school administrators, and have more prevalence of being diagnosed with ADHD than girls (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottier, 2012; Brown et al., 2003; Green-Burton, 2012; Hansen & Toso, 2007).

Being Gifted

To be considered gifted, students are typically found to have higher than average IQ scores or a vocabulary or skills considered sophisticated for their age, and the ability to reach a depth of thought on a given subject that their peers do not seem capable, and a greater ease of learning then chronological peers. (Hansen & Toso, 2007; Brown, 1993). Many students who fit this description are very successful in school because they find the course work easy, and enjoy positive accolades and potential to excel from teachers and school staff. The “positive cycle of engagement” is found in students who build on positive feedback, engage in positive engagement in the class, and in turn receive more positive feedback (Blaas, 2014; Landis & Reschly, 2013). Through this emotional and academic engagement process, students develop a feeling of belonging to school, and the cycle continues. With some gifted students, however, the cycle is broken when the student’s self-discipline and self-concept does not match the
expectations of the class (McCoach, 2002). This happens more often with males than females partly because girls often have higher self-discipline, and find more self-concept through pleasing others (Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009).

The most prevalent issue in identifying and addressing the problems of gifted students who choose to fail is the broad categorization of underachiever which both accurately and inaccurately describes this population. In 2012, Figg et al. presented study results based on Delisle’s theory that had been disaggregated to create a distinction between “under-achiever” and “selective achiever” which then lead to the term “selective consumer” being used for gifted students who were failing classes. Other studies have labeled these students that refuse to complete assignments as “non-producers” (Flint & Ritchotte, 2012; Kanevsky & Keihley, 2003). Whatever title they are given, the gifted male who fails classes by choice are telling schools that there is a poor match between his abilities and the coursework he is being given, and that his voice is not being heard (Hebert & Schreiber 2010; Merrotsy, 2013).

Within the studies that have focused on the unexpected failing of this students, much of the data points to the fact that problems with gifted boys start in elementary school, sometimes as early as 1st grade (Lee & Burkham, 2003; Little, 2012; Robertson, 1992). The signs were clear - absenteeism, underachievement, and mis-behavior, but some of the underlying reasons were misunderstood, and subsequent interventions were inappropriate. Young boys who are just starting to be viewed by the educational world may present a picture of someone with behavior issues and is unwilling to follow directions, when in fact, they were simply ahead of where the teacher assumed they should be. If they get bored and go exploring, they can be seen as disruptive. If they are branded “discipline issues” these boys tend to be placed in more remedial classes, and treated as underachievers because they do not conform to the work habits of the
other students. This ability grouping starts an ongoing battle between what the student feels he is capable of, and wants to do, and what opportunities are afforded to him (Merrotsy, 2013).

In high school, gifted underachievers present a different set of characteristics that compound the issue. Highly intellectual students prefer the ability to engage in problem solving and creation of new knowledge, as opposed to repetitive activities and review of known facts (Gentry, 2006; Hansen & Toso, 2007). Many gifted students are intuitive and interested in more complicated work than their classmates and need challenge and complexity to remain engaged (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Sak, 2003). While these attributes can be positive additions to learning, when coupled with curriculum and teaching pedagogy that is less self-paced, and more prescriptive, the potential for a gifted student to rebel and become a non-producer is there. As soon as some independent thinkers realize that “their success depends on their capacity to obey” (Hooks, p. 86) they begin to see school as less of a place where they belong. Some studies have found gifted males to be more impatient and less tolerant of situations, and very willing to argue with their teachers (Brown, 1993; Sak 2013) which adds to the need for qualitative study to look at how these personality traits play into school success.

Whether in elementary or high school, being misunderstood and seen in a negative light is an uncomfortable situation for all students, but it is compounded in the gifted child. Hansen and Toso (2007) found that along with high intellect, personality traits, both observed and perceived often include being very sensitive, introspective, intuitive and intense. Even those ready to argue with a teacher often have hidden sensitivity. A sensitive child will be more upset by teacher rejection, an introspective child will often try to discern what is wrong with them, as opposed to blaming others, the intuitive child can sense that they are not normal, and the intense child will react strongly to situations (Blaas 2014). To be a gifted child is to be most susceptible
to the risks and difficulty of navigating the first years of formal schooling. Developmental psychology reports that as children grow, they try to make sense of any “asynchronous development” which includes being gifted (Green-Burton, 2012). Throughout school, gifted students seek ways to fit in, and battle their sensitivity against a youth culture that does not promote intellectual abilities in boys.

**History of School Structure, Curriculum, and Gifted Male Students**

In 1867, the first classroom was built to house specific groups of students. It was called the “quincy box” (Fazzaro, 2012) and set the stage for over a century of inflexible grouping and very little movement of students. After only thirty years of the quincy box type of standardized education, John Dewey, educational philosopher, began to warn educators that choice and social interaction were some of the main factors needed for student learning (Nickel, et al., 1990) Desks nailed to the floor in rows in the box invites neither choice, nor social interaction. Changes were not made then, and have not systemically been made since, even though desks are no longer nailed to floors. Education still uses the basic elements of the quincy box today, and it is the least appropriate learning situation for gifted students. The industrial age, assembly line structure of school pervaded and the history of the “one size fits all” model laid the groundwork for current issues in the gifted student population.

To discern how schools, created by forward thinkers and intelligent men, have now become a barrier to forward thinkers and intelligent men it is important examine the roots of how current education is facilitated. Doll (1993) outlines educational “improvements” in schools that are based on industrial efficacy standards which created the groundwork for the oppression of highly intelligent male students. Studies of worker/manager relationships and time on task documentation offered a model to schools that want to produce the most and the best students.
“More time could be saved, and more goods produces if workers would do as they are told – this is the key to efficiency and standardization” was the model adopted by education (Doll, p. 48). Gifted students who think beyond the curriculum, move at a pace different than the class, or in other ways do not “do as their told” are seen as problems in the efficiency model of today’s classrooms.

When qualitative studies began to ask the hard questions, gifted underachievers described America’s classrooms in ways that should make any educator and policy maker stand up and take notice. While most people believe the correct sentiment is to be “given the opportunity to participate in compulsory education,” Flint and Ritchotte found that classes were described as being “subjected to compulsory education” (2012). Gifted underachievers talk often of being bored, time standing still, and feeling as though the school did not want them there. They admit to consciously working against the system that misunderstands them by rejecting work that is “beneath” their level, refusing to conform to expectations of “busy work” and harboring ill will towards their peers and teachers (Flint & Ritchotte, 2012).

In the 1960s, the notion of individual student needs began to break through the accepted educational wisdom. Maria Montessori, physician and educator, spoke out against traditional schooling using works like “forced,” “rude,” and “rigid” to describe how students were taught in classes (Nickle et al, 1990). With this new focus on the individual, schools started personalize instruction a little more by creating groups of like ability, which was a step forward for the gifted student. As a teenager in high school, gifted students would be in classes with other gifted students, and access higher order assignments and discussions. Also in the 1960s, psychologists were researching the various characteristics and needs of various stages of life, including that of teenagers. Erik Erickson’s 1968 studies discuss adolescence as a time to find ones identity
(Robertson, 1992). Research was presented on how the student’s need for time and space to process their identity was at odds with the typical demand of product from their schools. While it was not known at the time, this disconnect between adolescent identity and school function was even more profound for the gifted male students.

**Different Learning**

As researchers continued to look at students and how they learn, a classification system came forward in 1989 which was not specifically aimed at gifted students, but it helps explain why their frustration is so profound that they fail classes. Anthony Gregoric hypothesized that people process information with either an abstract or concrete way. Abstract students use deductive learning through the presentation of known concepts. Conversely, concrete learners use inductive learning through experiencing and encountering concrete objects or situations. In addition there is a preference in learners between either sequential order vs. random order of information input. When put together, these concepts create four types of possible student: abstract-sequential, abstract-random, concrete-sequential, and concrete-random (Robertson, 1992). In America, curriculum is taught abstractly and sequentially. Students who need to explore ideas as they discover them, touch, hold and manipulate objects and ideas (typically boys) and need the flexibility of time and space to learn best need schools that cater to concrete-random learners. Desks in rows, 57 minute learning blocks, and sequential curriculum is stifling to the concrete-random thinker. When it becomes too stifling, they underachieve, and disengage.

The quincy box and sequential curriculum coupled with the practice of common pacing within classes and the grouping of children by age and grade level leaves little room for student voice, or student empowerment. Elsie Robertson (1992) notes that gifted students, especially those who end up dropping out, maintain a healthy sense of “self” and find a lack of empowerment a personal insult. Having no control in the educational setting, they begin to rebel
in the only way available to them; they stop doing the curriculum presented. Historically, it was often assumed, or misunderstood, that when students failed, it was because they could not do the work, and they were included in the category of low achiever. The true motive of gifted underachievers was ignored until recently.

**Ability Grouping**

The focus on low achievers, as opposed to the “selective achievers” has had a dramatic effect on ability grouping in schools. Irison and Hallom (1999) found that while homogenous groups were the norm in schools until the 1980s, and were a positive experience for gifted students, it was discovered to be detrimental to students with low academic abilities. “Tracking” which kept many gifted students together in classes, was denounced and changed within educational structure. By the turn of the century, schools were grouping various levels of students together and training teachers to differentiate their instruction (Gamoran et al, 1995).

The change to heterogeneous classes has actually had both negative and positive effects on the intellectually gifted. On the positive side, the students experienced the “big fish, little pond” effect, which was an emotional engagement bonus (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Teachers who were now trained in various levels of student work began to be more willing to allow for advanced assignments. Many schools, however, are still more willing to adjust their expectations and curriculum to help students who struggle, but not to help gifted students who need to move past what was being covered that day in class (Preckel, Gotz & Frenzel, 2010).

It is interesting to note that schools still engage in “pull out” models for struggling students, creating remediation programs, afterschool workshops, and hiring experts to work with those with lower academic ability. This ability grouping is deemed necessary for the success of all students. Schools do not, however, look positively on “pull out” models for gifted students, instead it can be seen as elitist (Freeney & O’Connell, 2012). Recently, there has even been a
push to rate schools on their inclusion of “regular education” students into honors or Advanced Placement classes. There have been very few “pushes” to create appropriate, best case scenario situations for gifted students, especially those deciding not to enroll in honors classes due to the work load.

**Reform Efforts and Gifted Students**

To look back over the treatment of gifted students is to find glimpses of programs that were successful in creating meaningful appropriate experiences (Prestine & Burns, 1993). These programs have unfortunately not become systemic. In 2002, New York high schools created flexibility in the length of high school, allowing for some to go to five years, but more importantly, allowing those who could to graduate in three (Hansen & Toso, 2007). Accelerated programs are found to have a significant positive impact for the boys faced with inflexible pacing that does not match their skills. Dual enrollment programs have begun with community colleges to create pathways for those who need to reach beyond the high school curriculum, but these are not wide spread, and are sometimes not available to gifted students due to the history of failed courses. Alternative schools often offer different pacing choices for gifted students, but are viewed as a last resort, and the product of an unsuccessful record (Catterall & Stern, 1986).

With desks still in rows, and school structure still inflexible, the 1980s-1990s, brought the “Coalition of Essential Schools,” and other restructuring efforts. These programs came forward to make schools into places where deep mastery was touted over content coverage. In 1985, the book *Horace’s Compromise*, by Ted Sizer, prompted schools to get creative and start the “school within a school” movement (Nickel et all, 1990). For the gifted male, the flexible scheduling and creative teaching was a better system because they used each other, experiences and questions to drive their learning, not just a text book. Providing a voice and choices for gifted
students creates significant increase in success and engagement (Kim, 2008). Many of the reform programs in the past have offered the flexibility and grouping that the gifted students needed, however, changes have not reached a system wide level.

Policy makers continue to look for quantitative answers which leaves no room for the human side of these students, and while knowing common risk factors does help schools implement change for the “typical” population, they do not effectively predict which gifted students will become underachievers (Tyler & Loftsrtom, 2009). Schools are historically reluctant to reflect and examine their weaknesses, even when the body of knowledge is clear. Flint and Ritchotte (2012) claim the system continues to try and find a profile or a “type” and fix it on their individual level, without necessarily changing the schooling of said individual.

**Current Innovations**

While it can be frustrating for those who recognize the need for, and want to implement reform to continue to see schools resist changes that would help, there are many who recognize the unfortunate outcomes of student disengagement and the impact on their lives and, in fact, are creating new and innovative programs and schools that far better support student intellectual engagement than “typical” schools. Washington’s “Race to the top” program that called for innovative ideas and school reform had its share of critics, but showed some commitment to the idea of new approaches, and lead to many districts thinking outside the box whether they won the contest or not (Weiss, 2016). Those who research current trends in innovation and alternative methodologies to the long standing traditions of school structure continue to find more and more schools that are moving away from Quincy boxes and inflexibility. Schools with names like “High Tech High,” “Innovations Academy,” “Thrive,” and “Empower” can all be found in the county of San Diego California, which includes over 100 alternative school
programs within county limits (California Department of Education). National programs like KIPP academy are taking hold and growing, and philanthropy groups such as the Bill Gates Foundation are starting to take an interest in, and helping to develop the next generation of schools. There are those out there developing and building new models of schooling that shows greater student outcomes. For example, the school communities who are part of the Deeper Learning Network have evidenced greater achievement, student persistence and a greater percentage of students going into career fields or higher education than schools in the same communities (deeperlearning4all.org). These new schools and approaches to learning are and will be a tremendous help to students in offering more tailored programs that adjust to the needs of gifted students. There is movement in a new direction, albeit somewhat slow movement.

**Teacher Issues**

In the current system, most of the students who are identified as gifted received that label from a combination of assessments and teacher recommendations. Within this fact, one can assume that at any gifted who eventually fails or drops out, was, at some point, given positive marks from a teacher. Where the teacher/student relationship goes from that point forward has profound effect on later success. Both qualitative and quantitative data gathered includes information on the importance of teacher relationships (Lee & Burkham, 2012). Recent studies on failing students show that if their teachers had been different, students would not have dropped out of school. In fact, 25% of drop outs say that peer and teacher relationships were the main factor in their decision (Lessard et al., 2008). The cycle of teacher relationships can start at any point in a student’s career, but many who end up choosing to fail classes and leaving before graduation identify that their issues started in the early grades.
As previously noted, high achievers finish quickly, which can lead to down time and possible behavior issues. The inability of the teacher to realize that the student needs different work and the inability of the student to realize that they have different needs than the students around them can lead to frustrations on both sides. Students who present issues for their teachers in elementary school can start down a long path of being labeled a discipline problem. Frustration of the student can be mis-interpreted as aggression, and more focus is given to the behavior than to achievement. The next year, this same student may come to school with the same feelings of frustration and bitterness, even if they have a new teacher (Landis & Reschly, 2013). The new teacher sees low motivation, caused by prior experiences, and may not create chances for the student to show higher ability (Merrotsy, 2013). While the student may actually want more challenging tasks, they may only present poor work habits based on misunderstandings from earlier grades. Without the proper recognition of gifted levels, the student may be misunderstood for their entire school career.

Sometimes, as gifted boys are grouped with students below their intellectual abilities, entrance into adolescents adds a layer of rebelliousness and social pressures to compound the already frustrating situation. Some gifted high school students decide that teachers and schools are impressed more with conformity to rules and curriculum than original thought and asking complex questions, causing their level of frustration to intensify. As they look around, they may see classmates who strive to please the teacher and who are willing to do busy work and accept praise for simply following directions, yet they are not willing. As the disengagement continues, some of these students see “low level curriculum and a culture that disrespects them” (Hansen & Toso, 2007, p.36). When they look at text books that cover concepts on which they feel they have a solid grasp, they can get overwhelmingly bored, see the work as meaningless, and fail to
find value in the assignments given (Hansen & Toso, 2007). This distain for assignments can lead to failing grades regardless of content mastery.

**Teacher Reluctance to Change**

If key influences in successful education and proven structures have been known for so long, why are schools fundamentally unchanged in 100 years of history with students? There are many reasons for the entrenchment of schools in the old ways, some seemingly more valid than others. As they examined school structures, English and Kitsantas (2013) described deeply engrained habits and practices that pervade our schools and our teachers. The researchers describe teachers who traditionally have a solid understanding and acceptance in their position as the holder and giver of the knowledge. It is very difficult for some teachers to imagine another role (Kim, 2008). The needs of gifted boys ask teachers to offer questions instead of answers. Without empirical, quantitative data to ensure the correct outcomes, school employees are reluctant to embrace change, even if procedures worked in small scale studies (Thomas, 2012). Empirical data for the issues if gifted males is not easily attainable, and so programs are not built to address the problem.

Regardless of new knowledge gained about how to help our brightest minds, those who work in the trenches often defend their immobility in light of the amount of work required to truly implement structural change well (Tagg, 2012). Some ideas have come forward that ask for flexible grouping that can change easily and frequently. Fazarro (2012) suggested that schools imagine a schedule that allows for large group seating, and then lab groups followed by small group experiences, all having different time allotments and seating structures. This would allow for movement of not only the gifted student, but all students. These changes take more than willingness, however. The current realities of brick and mortar room size, bell schedules,
attendance coding and the control of materials within space and time is overwhelming (Perez, 2009; Tagg, 2012). Flexible grouping, frequent re-assessing of student abilities, and varied curriculum planning takes time, and includes energy and resources that schools and teachers are simply lacking.

In reality, teachers may not even have the ability to adjust curriculum for gifted students in their classes, even if they want to. In the years since No Child Left Behind, testing has required more universal teaching. Teachers are no longer offered freedom in delivery of different subjects or topics, they must remain within the testing curriculum (Gentry, 2006). The measurable outcomes that “Washington DC continues to pursue” (Perez, 8) create a culture of following mandates that teachers must accommodate. Aside from gifted students, studies on every subset of the student body show that diverse populations need teachers to provide different evaluations, and the current educational situation does not allow for that (Perez, 2009).

Too often, as teachers begin to see students as academic risks, problems, and deviants, some do not offer the respect to which the student feels they are entitled. This common theme of being disrespected by some teachers leads many students to begin a pattern of truancy. In the early years, students claim illness, and as they get older they simply skip classes to avoid the system they feel is not interested in what they have to offer (Landis and Reschley, 2013). Truancy can lead to grade retention quickly in elementary years, and lack of credit completion when they get to high school. Retention and remediation leads to students being in classes with students who are younger, and less knowledgeable. For a gifted student, this can truly compound the problem. Too many teachers do not have the time, resources, or training (Gerber et al, 2003) to create and develop higher level assignments for gifted students in regular classes, and it can be
possible that the history of being retained or failed keeps the teacher from knowing that a high intellectual ability is the root of the problems.

While intervention programs aimed at underachievement cannot help with many of the social and family factors pulling on students, for gifted students schools do absolutely have direct control over the biggest complaint of those choosing to fail (Lee & Burham 2012). When the students feel academically supported by the teacher, and are offered legitimate curriculum choices, their cognitive engagement goes up, and their attendance and behavior issues go down. Intervention programs that have worked with this population typically include close mentoring relationships, and flexible curriculum access options.

**Summary**

Schools were designed, and exist to create an educated society. Students grow, learn, and interact within our systems, and teachers strive to teach them well. Unfortunately, efforts to logically move children through curriculum, assuring that everyone gets the same information, has become too rigid of a method for some, and does not embrace a sub-population of students who want to explore their own curriculum, or go beyond their classroom peers. Rigid methods are unacceptable to intelligent, concrete-abstract thinkers, and some are choosing to remove themselves from the learning. Within, and in lieu of, slow coming structure wide changes, teachers must better understand the needs of highly capable but frustrated students, and create flexibility within their curriculum pacing. Acceleration options, flexibility within grouping and curriculum differentiation can help avoid further drop outs.

As gifted boys begin their school years, some do not fit the pace and behavior of the other students, and teachers can begin to see them as difficult, or defiant (Stolzer, 2008). While this is not always the case, for those who face this misunderstanding, the ongoing relationship with
school can become increasingly difficult. In the worst case scenarios, the teacher approach, school reactions, and the system whose focus is elsewhere work together to drive the gifted male out of school, and they leave before they graduate.

When researchers look at data that includes grades, discipline, retention, school participation, race and gender, often researchers see trends in students, and draw conclusions. Those conclusions, however, do not always take into account the choices that students are consciously making. It is only when the “reorganization of findings within student engagement goes beyond the previous tradition of describing the phenomenon of gifted students and addresses correlation of different variables” (Landis & Reschly, p. 242) that true understanding begins. Now that the work has begun, finding interventions for this particular group has potential for the state of education as a whole in our country. Engaging our smartest minds should be a priority.
Chapter III: Research Design

This chapter presents the design and methods of the research study. Within it, the focus, intent, and research procedures including data collection and analysis are included. Information on the identification of candidates, the identification of participants, and the protection of human subjects is also provided, along with steps that ensured the trustworthiness and validity of the findings.

Purpose of the Study

While research on underachievement in school is an ongoing and frequently covered topic, students identified as highly capable who nonetheless underachieve are a subset of the population that could benefit from additional exploration. This study is focused on how male students identified as highly capable earn low grades or fail classes describe and further explain their underachievement. Using a qualitative approach, the intent of this study is to gain insight into the needs of this specific population within classrooms in order to potentially help teachers better serve them.

A literature review found that while underachievement is a complicated and multi-faceted issue involving many factors, for highly capable students, concerns and frustration with curriculum, content, and pedagogy are frequently cited as determining factors (Blaas, 2014; Brown, 1993; Doll, 1993; Figg et al, 2012; Gentry, 2006; Gerber, Rayneri & Wiley, 2003; Kenevsky & Keighley, 2003). Interviews and responses to open-ended questions on a survey provided these students the opportunity to describe all the factors contributing to their underperformance. The researcher’s main focus, however, was the factors in the classroom environment that the students attribute to their underperformance.
As a current teacher, the researcher restricted the tendency to allow her experience as a curriculum leader, and the knowledge behind some classroom decisions, influence the validity of the student voices as presented. As students described any negative feelings about the classroom environment, curriculum, pedagogy or student-teacher relationships, it was important for the researcher to refrain from employing her explanations for the students’ experience, and simply capture the students’ descriptions and explanations. During focus group sessions and subsequent interpretation of responses, the researcher was true to student explanations and actively listened to and followed-up on the students’ descriptions, explanations, and perceptions.

**Research Questions**

The following two questions guided the design of the study including data collection and analysis:

1. How do those identified as highly capable male students who are considered academically underachieving describe the classroom environment, curriculum, pedagogy and student-teacher relationships in relation to their lack of academic performance?

2. What do identified highly capable males student believe would greatly increase their academic engagement in the classroom?

**Research Design**

According to Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2013) one of the main features of qualitative study is to research and describe how participants in an identified circumstance “come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation” (p. 9). Inductive methods of analysis used in qualitative research allows for others’ experience and perspectives to be recorded, documented, and honored.
There are various theories and previous study findings as to why highly capable students decide to disengage from classes with the result of lower grades. Because classroom environment and pedagogy are found to be prevalent factors within existing research, this study served to further explicate and explore those findings within the chosen setting. The researcher found a middle ground between a research design that was too tightly coordinated to allow for enough exploration and one that was too loose of a design that could make generalizable findings difficult (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). Open-ended survey and focus groups were employed to solicit and elicit participant explanations for their underachievement. While all responses were recorded and analyzed, the researcher used continued probing and clarification as students identified what classroom characteristics help them be more successful and to fully explore underachievement caused by factors within a teacher’s control. The theoretical framework chosen provided an additional lens by which the findings were interpreted once the data was collected and a thematic analysis was done.

**Research Paradigm**

Interpretivism is described as “an ongoing story told and refashioned by the particular individuals, groups and cultures involved” (Butin, 2010, p. 60). This study was designed to explore the phenomenon of underachievement by identified highly capable males and their explanation for their underachievement, with a particular focus on their classroom experience. The study also falls under a critical research paradigm in that the researcher sought responses and the voice of students who feel something within the experience of their underachievement could have been better. This is based on the assumption that intellectually capable students would have earned higher grades under different circumstances. While the critical perspective historically says that males hold privilege (Butin, 2010) this study posits that schools have been
feminized since the 1990s and have created a culture that perpetuates privilege for female learners (Kleinfled, 2009; Voyer & Voyer, 2014).

Research Tradition

Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research as a process through which we can explore and further understand the meanings that people or groups give to issues, and requires that the process includes emerging questions and procedures, as opposed to strict protocols. Different qualitative traditions were considered for the study, including case study and narrative. Considerations were made with regard to the depth and scope that each approach could provide, and it was decided that a focus on the experiences, which could vary in number by student, would create better insight than to know the historical narrative of the students as pursued in a narrative study, or the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and community members, as in a case study.

The use of an initial survey served to create data with regard to the prevalence of certain factors of explained underachievement, and possible themes of underachievement within the chosen school site. The use of a focus group setting then provided students with a greater opportunity to describe and share their experiences related to classrooms and their underachievement. One of the main purposes of the focus group sessions was to create a space for the target population to share their opinions and feelings towards their school and classroom experience and how they describe and explain their underachievement in the context of their classroom experience.

Site and Participants

This study collected information from a targeted sampling of male students who have been identified as gifted, but also have C, C- or F grades on their transcript. The first step was to
administer surveys that were anonymous, asking only for grade level and number of high school classes failed within the last year. The second step was to form focus groups to build off of survey responses with additional discussion questions. The districts, site and parents were notified and consent was required ahead of time.

Creswell (2012) explains the importance of purposeful sampling with regard to qualitative studies wishing to develop an in-depth understanding of an issue. For the second part of the study, the researcher invited identified students to participate in a focus group comprised of male students whose grades do not reflect their ability, as identified by others, and who express levels of disengagement from classroom activities and assignments. These students self-identified as willing to participate by returning the consent form to the researcher after the informational meeting.

The site chosen is a large suburban high school of over 3,000 students for grades 9-12 in southern California. The district has three high schools, and both the school and district are known for high achievement. The demographics are middle to upper class with the median income for the city being approximately $86,000 and 70% of housing being owner occupied (CityofTemecula.org). The particular high school in which this study took place has a 98% graduation rate, the highest Advanced Placement scores of the three high schools in the district, and had the largest increase in state testing scores in the district for the 2015-2016 school year. In a survey collected by guidance counselors in 2014, 74% of graduates went on to some form of college after graduation (37% of those enrolling in higher education went to a four year college or university, the remainder to a community college).

A general sorting of final semester grades for the 2015-2016 school year at the research site showed that of the 2,848 Fs earned, 1,909, almost 70%, of them were earned by male
students which is consistent with the national average. It is important to note that this district
does not include the grade of “D” within the grading scale at the high school level. Students earn
an A, B, C or F in all courses. As discussions were held, a C, C-, or F was considered as low
achieving, as a D mark was not available for the teacher to submit.

The selection process for participants of the study began with a data search in the
school’s student information system. Once all study approval requirements had been met, the
researcher compiled a list of students identified in the data system as “gifted” but who earned a
C, C- or F grade the previous year. Students who were on the list, and were not enrolled in the
researcher’s classes, were invited to an invitational meeting on campus. An email was sent home
to parents to explain the study the day before the meeting invitations went out. Consent forms
were available at that meeting for students to take if they were interested. The consent form
allowed for parents and participants to sign up for the online survey, the focus group, or both.

While plans were in place to limit the number of participants if the volunteer rate was too
high for manageable focus group, there was not an overabundance of consent forms returned
signed by parents. In total, only 12 students completed the online survey, some of whom went
on to participate in a focus group as well. While the researcher’s target number was 25-35
identified students, broken into groups of 5 or 6 per session, the overall number for the study was
23, with only 17 participating in three focus groups. The focus groups were considered
homogenous (Creswell, 2012) in that the students will have similar transcript characteristics,
which led to rich discussions.

**Data Collection**

Prior to any students or staff members being approached about the study, the researcher
went through the necessary steps of Northeastern University IRB approval, as well as district,
and site permissions. The survey was approved and consisted of several Likert scale questions having to do with the students’ academic self-perception, classroom experiences, and engagement, as well as opportunities for respondents to include their own comments to several open-ended questions asking about the same. By creating both closed- and open-ended questions, the researcher captured data to support the degree to which there were generalizations and prevalent responses across this population in the school, but also left room for ideas that could use further exploration (Creswell, 2012).

Once the focus group subset of students was identified and parent permission was obtained, focus groups were held at times convenient for the students. The groups were provided with a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions, and asked to share their experiences of and explanations for underachievement for 50-60 minutes. Students were asked to reflect upon all factors related to earning grades below their identified potential, however, the researcher took care to more fully elicit how students experience of the classroom environment, pedagogy, and student-teacher relationships may have contributed to their underachievement. The students were made fully aware that the group sessions will be recorded for later analysis.

Knowing that depending on the context, topic, and individual relationship amongst participants, focus groups can create interaction within a subgroup when they have the shared the same experiences (Creswell, 2012), the researcher detailed the purpose of the study and the necessity of confidentiality and respect for one another’s thoughts and opinions within the group. Upon arrival, focus group students were asked to write the answers to several open-ended questions about their experience as they relate to underachievement, and ideas that presented themselves on the survey given previously. The students were able to refer to their written thoughts as they participated, to help focus and encourage discussion.
Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was based on Saldana’s 2016 *Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. The use of structured coding helped the researcher index and label relevant data into initial categories (Saldana, 2016). It also allowed for some frequency insight, although that was not the primary function of the study.

Upon completion of the survey responses, answers were compiled into a data chart that included an area for the written responses. The answers to the Likert scale questions were tabulated and analyzed to identify any themes, frequency, and distribution of factors as identified by the participants. Analysis of the surveys happened first so as to inform the question stems for the members of the focus groups.

Upon completion of the focus groups, the researcher:

- Prepared the transcripts from each focus group, created pseudonyms for each student who offered responses, and added observations and researcher notes for each session
- Read through the transcripts in their entirety for initial impressions and overall understandings, and took note of any initial insights or observations within and across the focus groups
- Using descriptive coding (Saldana, 2016), the researcher summarized responses first into the category of negative or positive, and then into short phrases, and then classified the data from the transcripts into thematic categories.
- In a second cycle of coding, the researcher identified “patterns” from across the focus groups, using “pattern coding.”
After an iterative process of 1st and 2nd cycle coding, the researcher summarized the findings into a dominant set of themes in response to each of the two research questions.

Validity and Credibility

Various considerations were made when assessing the validity and credibility of this study including bias, reliability, and limitations. While every effort was made to ensure the highest quality results, pre- and ongoing consideration of these factors was an important part of the process.

Bias. The selection of this topic for research shows some bias as its origin. As a practicing teacher, I have seen and continue to see highly capable males produce work and grades that are significantly below their abilities. From a critical stance, I continue to see this as a problem to be studied. My bias comes from frequent anecdotal conversations with these students throughout the years, and observations of them both in my class, and from other teachers. Due to these conversations I lean towards the idea that we, as educators, are the ones who need to adjust our practice, not the students. In creating questions, and collecting responses, I had to be vigilant about the open ended nature of the conversations, and searching for various themes in the responses that support a variety of causes.

Reliability. The focus group participants were limited to students who fit a specific profile at the participation site, but that could be also found at other like schools if the research were to be repeated there. By using a set survey instrument, and several different focus groups which allows for a variety of responses, reliability was obtained in the general sense that students at similar schools experience and would report similar circumstances.
Limitations. The scope of the study is limited to 23 participants in a large, suburban high school in southern California. The site, as is the case with all schools, maintains an individual scope and level of reform and engagement procedures as part of its culture and procedures. While research and anecdotal evidence suggests that male gifted underachievement can be seen as present throughout the county, the sample size and location of this study does not allow for large scale generalizations.

Protection of Human Subjects

The survey and focus group participants are adolescent males who are not identified other than gender, and within larger groups of grade level, in the final reporting of study findings. Participation for the focus groups was initiated by an opt-in method when students were invited to signal their interest in participating by returning the consent form. All participants were reminded that their participation is completely voluntary, and that at any time they could have chosen not to participate. All students under the age of 18 were required to have parent permission for their participation in the study.

Steps were taken to ensure that the students who participate in focus groups remain anonymous to site staff. Paper deliveries to students during class periods is very common at the research site. Students are handed messages from counseling, administration, the activities department, and attendance on a very consistent and frequent basis. All messages sent to students were sealed prior to delivery, and were sent during different periods throughout the day so one teacher was not delivering several messages to the same student. In addition to message deliveries, results that are deemed insightful for staff development purposes will not be released until the following school year. Participants will no longer be enrolled in the classes about which they may have discussed in the study.
Beginning with the introduction of the survey, and inclusive of the focus group, the researcher reminded students of the voluntary nature of their participation, explained the benefits of their insight, and established respectful relationships.

**Informed consent.** Participants and their parents, for those under the age of 18, were made fully aware of the procedures and purposes of this research. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and participation in focus groups was established on an opt-in basis. All participants were reminded that their involvement is strictly voluntary and that they could have chosen to stop participating at any time. The researcher gained explicit permission for conducting the study from the district superintendent and principal of the school prior to starting any recruitment efforts.

**Confidentiality.** Transcription and coding contained student pseudonyms, and the information was housed away from the school site. No identifying information was reported within the findings, and the results will not be presented to the school staff until next year. Recordings were disposed of once transcriptions were completed.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this research study was to explore and better understand the experiences and perspectives of highly intelligent male students who earned a grade of C or lower in high school course work. The data was collected by using a short online survey, and holding three focus groups. This chapter presents findings that were compiled based on two research questions:

1. How do those identified as highly capable males who are considered academically underachieving describe the classroom environment, curriculum, pedagogy and student-teacher relationships in relation to their lack of academic performance?

2. What do identified highly capable male students believe would greatly increase their academic engagement in the classroom?

Summary of Site and Participants

The participants for this study were males who had been identified as GATE (Gifted and Talented) or GATE nominated, within the guidelines of the researcher’s district, meaning they had earned a specific score on a standardized test in elementary school, or had been nominated by teachers to participate in the GATE program due to exceptionally high performance. The initial query of students who met all three profile markers (male, gifted, course grade of C or lower) presented a list of 129 students, 27 of which had graduated the year prior. Of those 129, some were ineligible due to being currently enrolled in the researcher’s class, some were no longer attending the school, and some were alumni for which there was no forwarding contact information. Invitations to the informational meetings were sent to the remaining list which yielded 37 students who attended the informational meeting and took a consent form to be signed by their parent or guardian (though not all forms were returned).
At the time of the study, the students who participated were enrolled in grades 10-12 of high school, or in their freshman year of college. A query of their transcripts showed at least one grade of C or lower as a final semester mark during the 2015-2016 school year. There were a total of 23 students who participated in the study, all of whom currently attend, or graduated from the study site - a large, suburban high school in southern California. Of the 23, six participated in both the online survey and focus group, six participated in only the online survey, and eleven participated in only a focus group meeting.

**Data Collected and Themes**

The data collected within the qualitative study process was collected through online surveys comprised of both Likert scale and open ended questions, as well as three student focus groups. Most of the 12 completed on-line surveys were analyzed prior to the focus groups being held so that preliminary information from them could be included in focus group meetings. In looking at the survey responses, the researcher was able to collect both quantitative data on Likert scale options as well as qualitative responses within the open ended portion. This allowed for some follow up to question stems within focus groups. For the focus groups, open-ended questions were presented both in writing in front of the students, and orally. The researcher asked participants to answer pre-planned and follow up questions related to the research questions for the study. During the sessions, the researcher took notes, and after each of the focus groups the researcher transcribed the interview from the audio recordings.

During the transcription process, the researcher began reading and noting repeated ideas and emerging themes. Within further analysis of both survey results and focus group transcriptions, the researcher began the coding process by looking in the transcriptions for short words or phrases used by the participants about their perceptions, and then noting the similarities
to other responses, and the frequency of the ideas presented. Each phrase or word was placed first under the very broad category of negative or positive, and then under a more specific category or theme that best fit its message. The following themes were identified for the research questions:

With regard to factors attributing to underachievement:

- Students identified the differences between teachers who had negative attitudes and poor classroom management and those who were positive, passionate and skilled as a main factor attributing to their success, or lack thereof, in a course.

- Students identified “tedious” small scale class work and homework tasks that were not differentiated for higher intellect or mastery as a main factor in earning grades of C or lower, when counted as part of their grade in courses where mastery of the content was not an issue.

- Students identified repetition in content and lack of challenge within coursework as a contributing factor to lower motivation, engagement, and success.

- Participants discussed the impact of other students in their classes or work groups as being significantly influential on their class success; being surrounded by lower ability students caused them to lose motivation, while intellectual peers caused them to work harder and have more motivation.

With regard to factors students believe would increase engagement:

- Students identified lessons that included more active learning, like working in collaborative groups and presentations, as an activities that lead to higher engagement in their classes.

- Students discussed wanting more activities where they could actively create their thoughts and ideas with the teacher and their peers, like Socratic seminars and debates, as opposed to being told information through lecture or textbook.

- Students said they are more engaged in big assignments with big ideas and critical thinking, as opposed to small, narrow tasks.

- Students desire the ability to have some control over content through either choice of books, choice of problem solving method, and assignments that allow for creativity.

**Online Survey**

The initial design of the study was to create a database of students who fit the profile of the research, invite them to answer questions on a short survey, and then create focus group
members from that larger sample population. In actuality, fewer students completed the survey than focus group participants despite several reminders. Within the quantitative data portion, seven opinion questions with a Likert scale, the researcher noted consistent responses with the exception of one student who answered differently than the majority on many questions.

There were 12 participants who completed the survey: three sophomores, six juniors, one senior and two college freshman. Of the participants, 82% reported getting a C or lower in two to three classes the semester prior. One reported earning only one C or lower, and one reported earning four or more lower grades in their classes.

As the students gave their perspective on the reasons leading up to lower grades, 92% admitted that they felt they could get much better grades if they tried. 83% considered their classwork to be easy, and 92% said that it is easy to learn subjects in which they are interested. When it came to insight on lower achievement, 75% of the boys feel that their teachers do not understand their needs. 75% said they prefer assignments that challenge their thinking, and only 59% said they are willing to do assignments on content they already know in order to maintain a higher grade.

The open ended responses added some additional qualifications and specifics to the perceptions of the students with regard to their lower grades. Within only three open ended questions, a response about not completing homework or classwork was brought up 22 times as a reason for underachievement. Interest in and “relatable” topics was second most frequent, noted in nine responses, and difficult content was tied in frequency with comments about teachers with five responses each as a reason for lower grades. There were also less frequent and singleton perceptions about effort, activity types, and time management.

From the overall survey data, several things became clear, albeit clear for a small sample
group. In looking at the number of courses in which these boys underachieved, it was more than one single instance of underachievement for almost all of them. This leads the researcher to believe that it is not simply one subject or teacher that creates a situation for lower grades. If we consider that fact, and understand that it is not one teacher or one content area, it leaves us with the question of what other factors impact their success. The data was clear in this area as the boys repeatedly lamented about homework and classwork that they did not complete. This information was brought forth to help guide follow up questions within the focus group setting.

**Thematic Analysis of Focus Groups: Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 asked: How do those identified as highly capable males who are considered academically underachieving describe the classroom environment, curriculum, pedagogy and student-teacher relationships in relation to their lack of academic performance?

From a careful and iterative review of the focus group transcripts, four themes were identified:

- Students identified the differences between teachers who had negative attitudes and poor classroom management and those who were positive, passionate and skilled as a main factor attributing to their success, or lack thereof, in a course.

- Students identified “tedious” small scale class work and homework tasks that were not differentiated for higher intellect or mastery as a main factor in earning grades of C or lower, when counted as part of their grade in courses where mastery of the content was not an issue.

- Students identified repetition in content and lack of challenge within coursework as a contributing factor to lower motivation, engagement, and success.

- Participants discussed the impact of other students in their classes or work groups as
being significantly influential on their class success; being surrounded by lower
ability students caused them to lose motivation, while intellectual peers caused them
to work harder and have more motivation.

Each of these are described below.

Students identified the differences between teachers who had negative attitudes and
poor classroom management and those who were positive, passionate and skilled as a main
factor attributing to their success, or lack thereof, in a course. As participants were initially
asked about factors that lead to underachievement, a resounding and repeated influence was that
of the teacher. Throughout the focus groups, the attitudes, both negative and positive, and the
decisions teachers made about student discipline were described often. Comments on teachers
outnumbered all other themes found within the focus group portion of the study, and while they
were somewhat varied, two central focus points about teachers were seen: attitudes and actions.

Teacher attitude. Students described teacher attitudes in several ways. In one sense, the
boys described acting upon a give and take situation with the teachers, in saying that if the
teacher was willing to put in effort, they were willing to put in effort as well. On the flip side,
they made it clear that if a teacher was disinterested, than they would reciprocate with poor
effort. Participants described how teachers who are “passionate” and “engaging” contributed to
their own engagement and investment in learning. For example, one student said “They made
me want to keep my phone in my back pack.” The boys made it clear that despite the other
factors surrounding the coursework, an interesting and interested teacher was the biggest
influence on their day to day effort in a class, and a teacher who was not engaged or engaging
was a significant deterrent to their success.
Aside from engagement and passion, the students claim they work harder for teachers who push them, teachers who believe in them, and teachers who inspire them to be their best. They shared anecdotes about teachers who had given them second chances, or would not allow them to “slack off”. When they felt the teacher truly cared about them both as a successful student and as a person, their commitment to the class increased. Teachers who showed that they care were more influential for them.

The students showed differentiation between caring and friendship, however. They struggled when teachers seemed more concerned about being friends with students than teaching, saying they hate when teachers “just want to share what they did over the weekend, or try to be cool in front of the students.” One said that if the teacher was too friendly, “you lose respect for them, and just go to the class to hang out, but not really learn anything.” They also pointed out if a teacher is caring that they be caring for all students as important. They were unhappy about teachers who showed favoritism by seemingly caring about some students but not others.

**Teacher classroom management skills.** As the discussion of teachers continued, responses to several questions branched off into discussions about classroom management skills and the impact they had on the participants. The two most frequent subjects were the misbehavior of other students in the class, and the seating arrangement for the students that often left this population in the back of the room.

Disruption of other students was noted as a frequently discussed frustration among the focus groups. One student described a classmate “running around like a kindergartener” as he painted a picture of near chaos in his History class. Three other students described scenes of students “disrupting so they don’t have to work” and “the loud annoying kids” as they discussed classes in which they felt frustrated. They spoke of times where a teacher just gave up and
stopped teaching for the day because of misbehavior in the room. As noted later in the chapter, being in classes that had more likeminded peers enrolled, for example AP classes, was preferred partly because those courses were reported to have fewer disruptive students.

To combat the behavior issues, the boys described the teacher choice to put the “troublemakers” towards in the front of the room, which is a fairly common practice among teachers. For most of the participants, this choice left them in the seats further back, away from the teacher and away from the central information sources. While one commented that given the freedom to select his own seat, he typically chose the back of the room, others were able to pinpoint the seat change as a time their engagement and eventual success in the class took a turn for the worse. They said that “it became easier to not pay attention” and even that “all the bad behavior became concentrated at the front, but didn’t go away” which continued to make engagement difficult. When not in the back of the room, seating charts that grouped the participants with lower intellect peers also impacted motivation to work, as described later in this chapter.

Students identified “tedious” small scale class work and homework tasks that were not differentiated for higher intellect or mastery as a main factor in earning grades of C or lower, when counted as part of their grade in courses where mastery of the content was not an issue. What could be considered teacher action, and what came up most frequently after teacher comments in student responses was the type of homework and classwork that was assigned. The participants were clear that they were not inherently unwilling to do homework or classwork. They cited value in both, and felt that spending time at home studying was an appropriate activity to expect from them. What caused frustration, however, is the type of work given, both during and following school hours.
An examination of the focus group transcripts showed a clear pattern in the use of words like “tedious,” “busy work,” “menial,” and “little.” Frequently, the boys used these words to describe workbook pages, packets, and textbook activities that were very structured and did not require critical thinking. Small assignments, those based more on fact recall or fact copying, were considered tedious. Their preference is for large scale class activities and projects that require creation of new information from class content that was given. One stated “It bothers me when the teacher doesn’t let me think.”

While the boys spoke of being willing to review and study for tests, they felt that the smaller content tasks should be optional for those who needed them in order to master the material. When asked about the opportunity to participate in an “assessment only” grading practice for a class, in that only large projects or tests are part of the grade but no classwork or homework, all the boys said that would be their preference. One gave the example of a teacher who “only graded me on the big papers, and I did really well because he didn’t grade me on any of the little work that I didn’t do. The stuff I needed to get, I got.” More than half of the students reported failing a class due solely to missing homework, or “little work.”

Throughout the focus groups, most participants did not voice the overall opinion that they disliked the idea of homework as a general rule, nor did they say that the practice should be abandoned. However, the content of homework was a concern and a frustration. As they discussed homework, it was mostly the tasks assigned in which they found issue; one student called most of it “fluff” and another said “repetitive and pointless.” The general feeling across the participants was that instead of written repetition of what was learned during class time, unstructured studying that is not graded is the most appropriate form of homework for their population. They said they were willing and open to completing assignments that felt like an
extension of classwork, or a supplement to a lecture, or as one student put it “my teacher explained what needed to be done for practice as homework, and he would go over it, but only if you wanted to.” However, homework tasks that were repetitive and redundant, especially those without a direct connection to a test, were said to be the most frustrating.

**Students identified repetition of content and lack of challenge within coursework as a contributing factor to lower motivation, engagement, and success.** While low grades and disengagement in classes may lead teachers to assume that these students are not interested in learning, the discussions within focus groups were in contrast to this assumption. The boys discussed the desire to learn, the willingness to put forth effort, and the search for challenging content, all of which was thwarted by lessons and tasks that were too easy. When content was covered previously, was too simple, or perceived as irrelevant to their life, the participants reported it feeling like a waste of time.

Throughout the participant responses, teachers that repeated content several times, and content that was covered “over and over” was a significant factor in their underachievement. One student commented on an activity in his 11th grade English class centered on learning how to write a hook. Saying, “Writing a hook is third grade stuff. Can we move on already?” And another said that he felt his class had “Learned the same thing for three weeks in a row, and I got sick of it.” Frustration over repetition in assignments was voiced as an issue as well. One student when speaking of a vocabulary lesson questioned “If I already know those words, why should I write them again?” While they understand that other students need the additional practice to master material, the frustration of repetition of content and tasks was prevalent throughout all of the participants. One went as far as to say “we are stuck at the level of those around us, and we
have to wait for them.” The repetition of content offers them no challenge, as they tend to master the material within the first teaching.

According to student responses, challenge, or lack thereof, had a direct impact on their overall motivation within a class. Easy, repetitive tasks make them “want to stop learning”, and the easier something was “the less motivated I was to do it.” One student reported going to sleep for most of the period, waking up to do the task that was due, and then going back to sleep, a habit he said followed him to other classes and is something he struggles to stop.

Participants discussed the impact of students in their classes or work groups as being significantly influential on their class success; being surrounded by lower ability students caused them to lose motivation, while intellectual peers caused them to work harder and have more motivation. Going into this research, I have always felt that there was a distinction between “gifted” or highly intelligent students and honors students. I believe that gifted students bring intellect and deeper understanding to the table, whereas honor students, who may or may not have a higher intellect, bring the goal of achievement - and the work ethic to back up that goal. To look at the list of gifted male students who qualified for the study, it is clear that not all of those identified as gifted choose to participate in honors or higher level classes. While schools have various programs for upper level achievement, Advanced Placement, AP, is the delineation of courses with challenge and rigor at the research site. Of the participants in the study, some had taken AP classes, but not all. The ones that had were able to discuss the difference between homogenous and heterogeneous class settings. As they did so, those who had taken AP classes touted them as being their favorite, but only in part because of the more difficult curriculum.
Many participants were quite clear that being around other highly intellectual, or higher achieving students had a direct impact on their level of motivation and engagement. One student commented that “getting those people together is the best. It is a benefit to put the likeminded people with likeminded people.” For some, it was a sense of competition with like-minded peers that lead to higher achievement, and for others achievement came from the level of conversation and engagement within conversations with big ideas, and deeper understandings. “It made all the difference” was the sentiment of those who had experienced being surrounded intellectuals both in social situations and in the classroom. The participants enjoyed being able to challenge each other, share ideas, and not worrying about others “bringing us down” as when they were in mixed company.

When enrolled in heterogeneous classes, with students of varied ability level, the participants expressed concerns and frustrations about many aspects of the experience. Other students copying off of them and the misbehavior mentioned earlier were the main points of contention reported. Several of the boys spoke of finishing a task in class, and those seated around them asking to copy or relying on them to lead the group work. When other students tried to copy, it left the highly intellectual boys with several feelings; they did not want to sound like a jerk by saying no, they did not want to feel like they keep getting stuck with all the work, and they did not want those around them to feel less than intelligent. When copying was not an issue, other forms of misbehavior that kept the teacher distracted, or created disruptions to learning impacted the achievement of the participants in class.

Some of them admitted to taking on the same attitude of some of the disruptive students around them, and not caring about the class saying to themselves “If they don’t care, why should I?” Being placed at tables with misbehaving students, or those whose academics were not
priority impacted the behavior and motivation of these students who would possibly otherwise be engaged in learning.

**Additional Points**

An interesting side note to the influence of continued enrollment in heterogeneous classes with lower challenges and disruptive students was the cumulative impact over the years in high school. Three of the participants specifically noted that their bad habits grew worse from freshman year on, and that their underachievement has increased as they head towards senior year.

Another frustration that was reported within homework discussions, though not as often, was the time needed outside of school to complete the assignments. Homework that feels like tedious busy work coupled with wanting to engage in non-academic activities once home from school resulted in significantly lower grades. Time to relax or time devoted to extra-curricular activities or jobs played a part, but the boys lamented specifically about being asked to do assignments at home that they feel did not enhance their learning. One student admitted that “if I see an assignment that is something I already know how to do, 90% of the time I will just say no, and skip it.” Another said, “It’s my time to do what I want and I should be able to do whatever I am in the mood to” which was a sentiment felt by several participants. Others said they had difficulty balancing other extra-curricular activities with homework. One mentioned that it was stressful to act the way he was expected to all day, and it took a lot of energy to do so, and when he got home he needed to go outside and be active.

**Thematic Analysis of Focus Groups: Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked: What do identified highly capable male students believe would greatly increase their academic engagement in the classroom?
From a careful and iterative review of the focus group transcripts, four themes were identified in relationship to the research question:

- Students identified lessons that included more active learning, like working in collaborative groups and presentations, as an activities that lead to higher engagement in their classes.

- Students discussed wanting more activities where they could actively create their thoughts and ideas with the teacher and their peers, like Socratic seminars and debates, as opposed to being told information through lecture or textbook.

- Students said they are more engaged in big assignments with big ideas and critical thinking, as opposed to small, narrow tasks.

- Students desire the ability to have some control over content through either choice of books, choice of problem solving method, and assignments that allow for creativity.

Each of these are described below.

**Students identified lessons that included more active learning, like working in collaborative groups and presentations, and activities that lead to higher engagement in their classes.** While worksheets and menial tasks were lamented throughout the focus groups, certain class activities rose to the top of the preference lists for the participants. The students were adamant that they *want* to learn, and that *talking* is part of that learning for them. Listening to lectures, quiet reading with silent annotations, and individual paper tasks were seen by the boys as adversaries to learning, whereas discussions and group work encouraged engagement.

The best case scenario, as described by several of the students, was when the teacher does a mini-lesson, and then presents an in-depth problem to be solved by small groups in the class. As mentioned before, this is only best case scenario when the group consists of like-minded
students who can match intellects, and create thought-provoking discussion. One student said he doesn’t mind when others disagree with him, in that he learns the most from them, and appreciates the sharing of ideas. The opportunity to discuss and work though different ideas to ultimately solve some sort of content question was seen as significantly engaging and educational.

Presentations and games were also included in the “active learning leads to my motivation” discussions. One student stated “I want to stress so much about active learning. It is a side effect of a higher, more meaningful goal.” The participants noted that while some presentations and team competitions take them out of their comfort zone, they appreciated the push and challenge looking back, and felt there had been a positive impact. When they spoke if games, the participants made it clear that it was not the “fun” aspect of it, saying instead that “teachers who create games in class tap into our desire for competition” which was a sentiment that many of the boys felt was important. They said they were willing to study if they knew a team was counting on them, or if there was a chance to get extra credit. They noted that the extra credit itself was not the key, and did not have to be very much, but instead it was the aspect of winning something.

Students discussed wanting more activities where they could actively create their thoughts and ideas with the teacher and their peers, like Socratic seminars and debates, as opposed to being told information through lecture or textbook. As student responses continued, it became clear that they wanted opportunities to share the intelligence that they had, and liked to exchange ideas with others. Two students even admitted that they liked opportunities to “show off” their intellectual prowess. As noted in the last section, active learning and working with others is preferred by the participants, with the added preference on
doing so within a Socratic seminar or debate type scenario. Class discussions, times when everyone is asked to analyze and hearing various viewpoints, were seen as the most engaging activities for learning in a class.

There was an idea thread found here that is seen throughout some of the other topics as well. As noted in the homework section, a student was frustrated by pre-selected homework for the day, as opposed to seeing what needed additional practice at the end of the lesson. Within the discussions on Seminars and debates vs. textbook work, the boys seemed to appreciate the nature of information being created and organic, as opposed to there being set information to simply memorize, or facts that were simply considered correct. For example, one said “don’t give me a workbook page to do in 45 minutes, because I can get it done in about 18” to which another followed up with “I need projects where I can talk to others, hear their perspectives which influenced how I did, and what content I focused on.” The idea of organic pacing and the creation of information, as opposed to preplanned and possibly artificial start and stop points within content seems to appeal to this population. One participant described it as “instead of viewpoints being forced into you like ‘here, take this’ it is more you throw out what you believe, I throw out what I believe, and everybody analyzes it.”

Students said they are more engaged in big assignments with big ideas and critical thinking, as opposed to small, narrow tasks. The students made it clear that while some teachers and parents often consider them lazy or uninterested in learning, the truth is that difficult, thought provoking lessons are their favorite. One student reported “I barely passed my easiest class, it was my most difficult one that I put in the most effort and got the best grade.” Another stated that he loves challenging topics, and working through any in-depth task. Many echoed the sentiment of one that said when a teacher gives them “an easy, book related task to
work on all period I am bored, and it makes me dislike the class.” Classwork that requires only completion of work, as opposed to thinking, is not seen as valuable or educational to this group.

When given the choice, “Let me think”, instead of let me complete work was a common theme throughout the responses in the focus groups. They don’t mind annotating, but they want to be able to discuss it and share ideas as they go. They don’t mind projects, but want to be allowed to include big ideas and in-depth topics. As the students discussed typical classwork and homework it was the lack of thinking involved that created disengagement and underachievement. They do not feel lazy and uninterested in learning, they claim that they are not actually being asked to learn.

**Students desire the ability to have some control over content through choice of books, choice of problem solving method, and assignments that value their intelligence and allow for creativity.** Students voiced strong objections to some teacher actions that cause them to shut down, stop working, or lose motivation. The two biggest teacher approaches that created frustration were those which lead to less choice for students, and times when they felt their intelligence was being ignored. When teachers required that all work or writing be done a very specific way, regardless of student preference, the participants reported feeling jilted and stifled. One student claimed that his brain simply organized things in a different way than his teacher asked him to produce, but that his information was still correct. He said he could not “understand the value of doing it her way. Shouldn’t it just matter that I got the right answer?”

Having to show work for math problems they can do in their heads was another example several students used to describe this frustration. Being forced to show work, or complete lengthy study guides to review for a test when they felt had mastered the material caused them to shut down, and not complete the expected tasks. One student said “I will look over a study guide and find
the ones I don’t know, and focus on those. I don’t understand why I have to fill out and be graded on the whole thing if I already know most of it.”

As found in the research leading up to interviewing highly intellectual students, choice was an important aspect of how these boys approach their work. Choices in books to read, choices in tasks to complete, and choice in how to both approach and prove their mastery of content is sought after by those interviewed. One student admitted that he loves reading, and reads for pleasure all the time, but rarely finishes a book assigned by his teachers. Another noted that he struggles to learn and remember things he is not interested in, and when given choices, his grades improve.

Summary

The first research question asks highly gifted students to reflect upon classes where they earned a lower semester mark than they could have given their ability with the content. Several of the focus group questions were designed specifically to elicit responses about things that directly impacted grades of C or lower in order to answer this question. As students responded, their answers can be grouped into four themes which offer insight into their underachievement.

The main impact described by the participants was that of their teachers. Teachers were described in various positive and negative ways as the boys shared their perceptions. Once compiled, their responses created a somewhat simplified theme that positive, interested, passionate teachers created positive, interested, passionate students; whereas teachers who seemed disinterested and disengaged brought out those same feelings from those in their class.

Other themes that presented themselves for research question number one were less about teacher attitudes, but instead about the instructional decisions that the teachers make. Participants spoke frequently and negatively about classwork and homework that was tedious,
repetitive or too simple to spark real thinking. They also blamed their disengagement on the lack of challenge and relevance found in so many of their assigned tasks and that of student grouping. In addition, the participants spoke of social grouping, class grouping, and small student groups within a class all as having an impact on their level of achievement. Homogenous grouping in all three situations was touted as being preferred and helpful in different ways.

As the purpose behind the research study is to create insight for teachers and administrators about best practices for this population, the second research question reverses the reflection about classes and asked the participants to reflect on a time where they did well in a course and share their perception of what things lead to their success. While the four themes that were found include some specific information and activities, an overarching positive was that of active engagement and active learning. The things described in their responses included talking, sharing, creating and being part of the information, as opposed to simply being told information. Responses included activities like debates, Socratic seminars and presentations, some of which were described as a way for the boys to both “show off” and increase their knowledge base.

After considering the responses and discussions of the 23 highly intellectual male students, significant factors leading to underachievement seem to fall under the broad categories of who is running the class, who is in the class, and what is being assigned within the class. The teachers themselves are at the heart of the discussion both through their attitude and perceived feelings towards their classes and students, but also through the pedagogical choices they make with regard to assignments and classroom management. Teachers who are excited about their course cause this population to be excited about their course. Teachers who understand the needs of highly intellectual males and give them ample opportunities to think critically and
problem solve surrounded by other students who share the same abilities help this population to find success. Teachers who maintain a learning environment, and retain high expectations from all encourage this population to stay engaged.
Chapter V: Discussion of Findings

In this chapter, the researcher will present key findings from responses to the student survey and analysis of the focus group transcripts, and draw conclusions about how those responses address the research questions of the study. Implications for teachers and administrators, and implications for future research will also be included. This chapter will begin with a review of the problem of practice, methodology used, and analysis of the themes found. The significance of the study, including limitations and validity will be presented at the end as well.

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Since the 1990s, when educators realized that female students were falling behind in various school measurement tools, there have been changes to curriculum, ability grouping, and programs in schools to help girls succeed (Wein, 2006). Data now shows that the trend has reversed, and many male students are doing poorly in their classes. A subset of these males have the capability to do very well, based on higher intellectual levels, but are showing signs of disengagement and earning low semester grades.

Researchers have begun to look at both the male student success rates, and those data about highly intellectual students, but there are not many studies that connect the two and focus primarily on students that meet both criteria. Data show that up to 70% of the Ds and Fs in our country are currently earned by boys (Kim, 2008) and that 63% of gifted or highly intellectual students underachieve (Blaas, 2014). While many school and district programs continue to devote resources to struggling students who need support to master the content of their classes, the needs of gifted students too often go unmet. This study was designed to create a better
understanding of why some intellectually gifted males are not achieving in some, if not many, of their classes.

The problem of practice focuses on the disengagement of highly intellectual male students in high school classes. Brain research and educational studies show there are needs, both biological and social, that should to be met in order for this population to be engaged and successful (Kleinfeld, 2009; Slotzer, 2008; Voyer & Voyer, 2014). The changes in schools post 1990 have had an impact on those needs, and current negative data trends tell us that this needs to be addressed.

**Review of the Methodology**

The research was done within a general qualitative study based on the critical paradigm that seeks to give a voice to highly intellectual males who have low grades in spite of content mastery. The study was done in two segments; first, an online survey containing 11 questions, both Likert scale and open ended, was given to participants, second, students were asked to join focus groups to further discuss preplanned questions and follow up information from the survey.

Online, preplanned, and responsive questions were designed to collect responses that addressed two research questions:

1. How do those identified as highly capable male students who are considered academically underachieving describe the classroom environment, curriculum, pedagogy and student-teacher relationships in relation to their lack of academic performance?

2. What do identified highly capable males student believe would greatly increase their academic engagement in the classroom?
To create a participant pool for the study, the researcher obtained a list of all male students who qualified as “highly intellectual” through their participation in, or nomination for, the research site’s gifted program who also had semester grades of C or lower during the 2015-2016 school year. The original list contained 129 possible participants. After names were removed due to conflict of interest (currently enrolled in the researcher’s class) and lack of contact information (for those who had graduated or moved) the remaining students were invited to an informational session during lunch at the school. The study participants are those students who were invited, attended, and subsequently followed through with consent forms and completion of surveys or focus groups. Twenty three students, ranging from sophomores in high school to freshman in college, are included in the final information and findings. Of the 23, six participated in both the online survey and focus group, six participated in only the online survey, and eleven participated in only a focus group meeting.

The data was compiled through the surveys and focus group transcripts in several steps. The survey responses were separated by Likert scale and open-ended responses, and then the open ended responses were reviewed to discover patterns and themes that connected the ideas. The percentages from the Likert scale questions and the themes were considered prior to focus group meetings. Once the focus groups were completed, the transcripts for each were reviewed and grouped first by expressing either negative or positive descriptions of experiences, and then further coded by similar phrases and words. Grouped ideas were then analyzed to develop themes found in the responses.

Discussion of Major Findings

After analysis and synthesis of all participant responses, eight themes emerged and were presented in chapter four. During further analysis and consideration of the themes the researcher
has identified three key findings that may be provide some further insight for educators as to why some intellectually gifted males are not doing well in some of their classes:

- The achievement of highly capable male students within most classes is highly influenced by both the content based instructional decisions and classroom behaviors of their teacher.
- This population clearly stated that they prefer to be engaged and achieve, and can articulate which activities and approaches increase their engagement and, subsequently, their achievement; when faced with work that does not intellectually challenge them, they do not put forth the effort in those classroom activities.
- Student intellectual engagement and effort is impacted by the culture of the classroom and the types of peers that are around them. Higher intellectual peers bring out motivation and achievement in this population, whereas mixed classes that have some students who face issues with behavior or content negatively impact their engagement in classroom activities.

The achievement of highly capable male students within most classes is highly influenced by both content based instructional decisions and classroom behaviors of the teacher. Teachers are responsible for the planning, execution, and adjustments during class lessons. As the participants responded to the research question, it was clear that what the teacher does, and sometimes does not do, is key to their success. While the boys were self-reflective about their own strengths and areas for improvement, they continually tied their engagement and subsequent success back to what the teacher included in the class.
Several comments were made within the focus group that reflect how strongly the students felt about the impact of their teachers. When asked what factors played a role in past grades, both low and high, the students commented:

- For me, it is the teachers that have a good way of teaching and interacting with their students
- I failed a class last year because I was not really motivated by the teacher. All she did was hand out packets
- Usually the content is not hard, but when it is unorganized and inconsistent I stop caring
- I like teachers who engage their students, too much talking puts the class to sleep
- If it is a great teacher, I am more than willing to put the effort in
- It all depends on the teacher. The biggest thing is definitely the teacher.
- You can tell who is passionate and who is just getting by in their job

As students described experiences with their teachers, they were able to identify both positive and negative recollections, and how those experiences impacted their engagement and motivation to achieve in the class. It seemed they were able to tap into how a teacher felt about their course, and then matched that energy to their own. Positive energy from a teacher instilled positive energy from the participants, and vice versa. To the participants, teachers who were passionate about their subject and interested in being at school created classes where there were more engaging activities. Teachers who were seen as engaging designed their classes with lessons that included games, debates and discussions around the content. These activities directly translated into what they called “active learning” and what they prefer in their coursework.
Active lessons, while key for engagement, were secondary to the overall behaviors and actions of the teacher during a class period. Even the classes with appropriate activities and tasks could be overshadowed by the classroom culture and when discipline was handled poorly by the teacher. Engaging lessons were thwarted by decisions about seating charts that left gifted students in the back of the room or surrounded by those not interested in learning. In addition, teacher choices about homework assignments, and repetition of content, even within the preferred activity types, were all seen as having significant impact on the success of those in the focus group.

This population clearly stated that they prefer to be engaged and achieve, and can articulate which activities and approaches increase their engagement and, subsequently, their achievement; when faced with work that does not intellectually challenge them, they do not put forth the effort in those classroom activities. While lower grades may lead people to consider this population lazy, or unwilling to do school work, the responses showed a different reason for underachievement. The students wanted the work to be more difficult and require more participation from them. Participants of the focus groups were able to clearly list and describe classroom activities in which they found engagement and challenge. They did not describe tasks or assignments that were easy or simple, instead they are requesting challenge and involvement. When asked about work that they preferred, as opposed to work they typically did not complete, they commented:

- I would prefer to write an essay every day than to go over work that I already know
- I love challenging topics, but I don’t like tedious things
- I hate busy work, I hate the tiny little things like “go home and copy 10 vocabulary words”
- Forcing me to do menial tasks gets to the point that I just won’t do it
- Last year one of my teachers only graded me on the essays. I did well because he didn’t grade me on any of the “little stuff” that I had not done

When requested to complete a task for a course, the level of complexity of the task was partly a predictor as to the likelihood of these students completing it. When faced with tedious, or simple task, the respondents in the focus group were reluctant to complete it, despite it being an easy way to ensure a successful grade. An assignment, either during class, or for homework that felt like recall, or simple completion held no interest for this group. Simply being given information to copy or memorize led to disengagement and low completion scores. Several participants even admitted to failing entire semesters of a class based on the refusal to do tasks that they did not feel were meaningful.

**Student intellectual engagement and effort is impacted by the culture of the classroom, and the types of peers that are around them.** Higher intellectual peers bring out motivation and achievement in this population, whereas mixed classes that have some students who face issues with behavior or content negatively impact their engagement in classroom activities. While heterogeneous classes have been standard practice for several decades, responses from the focus groups made it clear that multi-level grouping can be problematic to their success. There were two main issues that presented themselves for these students: content being repeated due to other students in a class learning more slowly which led to boredom and disengagement, and misbehavior of others in the classroom which led to the teacher having to make classroom management decisions.

As they described classes that they share with students who struggle with mastery of the content, this population spoke of feeling:
- Stuck at the level of the other students
- Not allowed to be smart
- Bored by having to do the same thing over and over
- Frustrated to be around all the kids who are goofing off

They described frustration in learning concepts they felt had been covered in prior lessons or years, some even in elementary school. Learning the same thing over and over, with repetitious assignments quickly led to boredom and less motivation in their classes.

Students who displayed misbehavior causing the teacher to be off task, change seating, or even stop teaching was described as a factor in underachievement as well. Seating charts that placed gifted in the back of the room, other students getting away with copying work, and distractions from learning were all causes of waning motivation in a class. This population described these types of students in a class with them as “bringing me down to their level” and creating a hands off attitude towards school work.

Connections between Survey and Focus Groups

While there were not extensive open ended comments about teacher passion or management styles in the survey, a connection can be made to the 75% of participants who responded with either “disagree” or “strongly disagree” when asked if their teachers understand their needs as an intellectual student. The themes from the focus groups including lack of differentiated work, relevance of tasks and likeminded grouping, added clarity to how the boys feel their needs are not understood.

As noted in the survey overview, the open ended portion resulted in 22 responses that discussed homework and classwork as a significant factor for underachievement. This was confirmed by the responses in the focus groups with frequent examples of specific tasks that
were frustrating and often left undone. The significance within lack of challenge noted in the survey results, with 75% preferring work that is challenging, but 83% feeling that their classwork is easy was also confirmed by focus group discussions.

Two of the Likert scale questions are connected to the themes found for the second research question. As noted in the summary, 75% of the students who responded said they prefer assignments that challenge their thinking. This was supported by the comments made in the focus group setting. An even higher percentage was seen when asked if they felt that topics of interest were easier to learn. 92% answered that they “strongly agree” with that statement. Both forums confirm that students are given choices in text or materials, they are more engaged in their learning.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

The Selective Consumer theory, and subsequent findings of the “Five Cs,” serves as the framework in looking at how highly some intellectual students approach their classes. The main idea of selective consumers is that students underachieve not because of difficulty with mastering the content presented, but instead because their academic self-perception is elevated, and they decide what learning they feel is worthy of engaging in, and what tasks are meaningful enough to be completed.

One of the ideas within the Selective Consumer theory is that truly gifted students are very interesting in learning, but do not always see “learning” and “school” as synonymous (Delisle, 1992). Students who do not devote time to the lessons within a class because they already know the information are very willing to devote time to learning new things and things that challenge them. This was clear in the responses from participants. One even mentioned that
he can remember an inordinate amount of information about a computer program he has been studying, but can remember very little about what his teachers ask him to do.

Another main idea in Delisle’s theory describes how the academic concept of gifted students can differ from their peers. As Delisle (1992) wrote, “If given the choice, gifted students may opt to post examples of work that was a difficult assignment, instead of a perfect paper that required little effort on their part” (p. 61) which was also evident in the findings. Many of the participants made it clear that getting good grades was not their highest priority, but finding challenge and learning in a class was. The findings support the theory in at least two ways:

- Several students admitted that upon seeing a homework assignment that was repetitive or tedious, they would opt not to complete it 90% of the time. Almost all the participants admitted to failing or almost failing a class due to not turning in work that they could have easily completed, but chose not to.

- Many students responded that they were not always motivated by grades. Instead they were in search of intellectual stimulation, and found pride in completing difficult tasks.

Delisle’s theory has been used in various studies with regard to gifted students. The findings of the “Five Cs” within research based on the selective consumer theory served as an additional lens for the study. Challenge, control, complexity, choice, and caring, were imbedded in the online survey and focus group questions, and the responses confirmed much of the theory about each.

- Challenge – students admitted to wanting challenge in their courses, and that lack of challenge was a main determining factor in times where they had lower motivation.
Repetitive, “small” tasks that did not require thinking were often left undone, leading to lower grades.

- **Choice and Control** – participants said that having some control of choice of content, how to show their learning, and how to prove mastery of concepts was important to them. They spoke of being forced to show their work in certain ways, or having to adhere to strict teacher formulas for information. The freedom to use their intellect to create different ideas, and control over the finish product were factors for engagement.

- **Complexity** – students lamented about simple, tedious, “small” tasks that involved only retaining information instead of creating information. They said they crave assignments that require critical thinking and discussion of big ideas.

- **Caring** – the level of caring in their teachers, both about the course and about them personally, was a significant contributing factor to engagement and motivation to do well in a course. Participants spoke frequently about teacher attitudes and relationships as they discussed both positive and negative experiences.

The participants in the study, both through the online survey and the focus group participation met many of the aspects found in the selective consumer theory, as well as the “Five Cs”. The key idea that these students have an elevated academic self-perception can be seen through quotes about wanting to participate in more discussions so they can “show off” and those that are truly asking for more difficult tasks.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

In chapter two the researcher presented literature about male students, highly intellectual students, and any research that included both of those traits together. The chapter began with
sections specifically about the biology of males and how that biology impacts school behaviors. The review then included information on gifted students, and how their needs differ from their non-gifted peers. Finally, the chapter covered school structures including prior reform attempts and teacher issues, and how today’s school structures impact gifted male students. The findings from this study center more on the latter part of chapter two, and the relationship between school culture and this population of students.

One of the main aspects explored in the “Being Male” sections of the literature review discussed the need within boys to move and be active. While the participants did mention aspects of how their biology may impact performance, and some of their responses can be connected to what was learned about male biology, it did not present as a main point of conversation within the study. One student said that “it takes a lot of energy to just stay still and be how they want me to be all day” and another commented that the desks make them “feel constrained,” so the aspect of males needing movement and needing to touch, move, and explore things (Green-Burton, 2012; Stolzer, 2008) was present in the conversations. Ongoing references were missing, however, so it was not included as a theme.

Research on one of the main reasons for the focus on highly intellectual males as opposed to females was presented within the section on gifted students. Tyler and Lofstrum (2009) report that girls often define more of their self-concept through pleasing others than males do. Student responses within the study validate this finding, although only males were interviewed, so there was no opportunity to dispute from the female perspective. The boy’s responses when asked about doing classwork and homework centered on whether or not they wanted to do it. At no time in the study did the students mention doing work simply to please a teacher or parent. They remained very focused on their own feelings about the work which led to completion or refusal.
In another portion of the literature review that discusses gifted students, research was presented that posits gifted students need for intellectual stimulation and creation of new knowledge (Gentry, 2006; Hansen & Toso, 2007). This idea was also confirmed within the responses in the study through both direct statements, like “pre-planned book work that they simply give us is boring” and through the description of preferred activities. As the boys described their favorite lessons they listed Socratic seminars, debates, and class discussions where ideas are presented, analyzed, thought about, and new ideas are created. Some research describes males as less patient and less tolerant of lessons that do not require intellectual stimulation and discussion (Brown, 1993; Sak 2013) which was seen through the frustrated student responses.

The impact of ability grouping was included in the section of chapter two that presented research on school structure. The literature shows that the shift from homogenous grouping to heterogeneous grouping in the 1980s has impacted gifted learners in a negative way (Irison & Hallom, 1999). As the participants answered questions about what creates positive engagement and motivation for them, the presence of other gifted students around them was brought up several times by all three focus groups. One student went as far as to say “getting these students together is the best. It is a benefit to put likeminded people with likeminded people” as he discussed student grouping. The responses about peer groups ranged from negative, frustrated feelings towards students who struggle to positive descriptions about being in groups or classes with other gifted students. Across the board, the sentiment was the same. This population prefers being able to share ideas with other higher intellectual students, and is frustrated when students who struggle become a disruption in class, or cause repetition in the content in order to gain mastery.
The final section of the literature review covers how teacher issues impact gifted students. Research is plentiful in both the qualitative and quantitative arenas with regard to the importance of the teacher in student performance (Lee & Burkham, 2012). The results of the study confirm these findings as discussions about teachers were the most frequent when asked about factors that impact success. While the research presented in the chapter focused on teacher understanding the differentiated needs of gifted learners, the findings in the study could be seen as a more general list of strategies that can be used with all learners.

The online survey portion of the study revealed that 75% of respondents felt their teachers did not understand their needs as a gifted student, which is reflective of research found in relation to teachers. Tagg (2012) claims that regardless of how much research is presented to teachers about the needs of those in their classes, response can be slow or minimal due to the amount of time and work required to implement change. The student suggestions of large project only grading policies and additional discussion based lessons, however, are not seemingly work intensive, nor overly complicated.

**Implications of Findings to Practice**

The study was designed to create insight for teachers and administrators working in today’s schools. The information could also extend out to parents who may view their son in a negative light due to underachievement, and even to others in this population to possibly create self-reflection.

In relationship to the findings of this study, this researcher has identified two implications worth noting:

1. Easily implementable teacher adjustments to classroom culture and lessons in addition to ongoing movement towards reform
2. Student ability grouping is an important factor for gifted engagement

**Easily implementable teacher adjustments.** The first implication is that there are adjustments in teacher practice that can be made in order to better serve this population. As noted above, it was found in the literature review that there are numerous, legitimate reasons as to why teachers struggle to truly differentiate their lessons. Time constraints, additional class size, work load, new mandates, and the shift in standards to Common Core curriculum all take a toll on teacher’s ability to be all things to all students. There is movement in the field of education towards significant change to school structures and teacher pedagogy, and many would say that movement is growing. New schools, new networks and new research is slowly starting to make a difference in the landscape for these students, but for those who still sit in 50 minute periods with little flexibility, those changes may not arrive before graduation.

The responses from the study, however, give some easily implementable adjustments that teachers can make in their classes. During planning, teachers should begin to look at the tasks assigned, and the grade attached to each. In considering each task, questions they may want to consider include: Is this practice task mandated for those who have mastered the material? Does this task ask the student to think critically, or simply recall or copy facts? Should this task represent a grade in the gradebook, or is it practice for something bigger that will represent a grade? For lessons, teachers should look for places where a larger discussion, debate or seminar type activity would be appropriate, and include them more frequently.

There are implications for teacher planning that are less easily achieved as well, some of which may require additional staff development training. For content, teachers should look for ways to present a *question* to their students, as opposed to the *answer*. Training for teachers on the facilitation of guided questions and activities that lead to the creation of knowledge, as
opposed to the simple acquisition of it, is a larger undertaking than adding debates to lesson plans. Allowing for student collaboration, and different presentations of the “right” answer is unfamiliar territory for many teachers. In addition, allowing for the possibility of using pretest data to guide lesson planning, and creating enrichment activities for those that score very well on pretests takes additional time and collaboration of teachers.

**Student ability grouping.** The second implication is that while the benefits of heterogeneous classes have been understood and practiced for the last several decades, it is important to create various opportunities for success and engagement that meet the needs of all students which means creating homogenous grouping during some lessons. When possible, homogenous grouping should be included to give these gifted students a chance to challenge each other. Because this can be done in current heterogeneous classes, it does not call for an overhaul of master schedules, or a change in the pedagogical understandings of heterogeneous class benefits. It does, however, promote the idea of grouping within classroom or purposeful clustering of gate students within enrollment of courses. Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by California and therefore being implemented at the research site, require teachers to increase student collaboration in their classrooms. The participants in the study request that when these collaborative groups are formed within a class, that they are more frequently done with the intention of like-grouping. The responses highlighted several ways that intellectual grouping helped them, and mixed grouping was detrimental to their motivation. Being enrolled in classes with a high number of intellectual students was important for engagement of this population as well. Creating opportunities outside of AP or honors classes where highly intellectual students can be in the majority would be a beneficial move for schools to consider.
The study also brings to light various class and homework practices and tasks assigned and what types of assignments students are being asked to do. At the research site, there are currently two teachers who have implemented an optional “assessment only” grading policy for their class. This shows that the practice can be done within the current constraints of the site’s grading software and district policies. Possible training and staff development could increase the use of this type of approach across the campus. Conversations within departments could be geared toward sharing best practices and lessons that include tasks that require higher level thinking, and less recall or fact acquisition. Again, the movement towards Common Core State Standards will push this particular issue forward in that critical thinking is prioritized over more simple tasks.

**Significance of the Study**

While debates over school reform and research on educational best practices are seemingly endless, actual significant change can be slow-paced and difficult to detect. The problem of practice for the study posits that the lost potential in gifted students is a pressing issue, and needs to be addressed quickly. As discussed in the problem of practice section, as these students disengage and earn low semester grades, the cumulative impact on their transcript can be a barrier to their college application process. For both the students personally, and the potential for impact they could have on college campuses and society, helping them fulfill their potential has many positive outcomes. The responses to the study provide insight as to reform needs school wide, but also some fairly easy to implement changes to classes that can be done without a lot of additional training or significant change.

For teachers, insight as to the types of tasks and lesson plans that inspire these gifted students to achieve could increase overall engagement in their classes and higher grade
distribution. Administrators and state curricular reforms have been asking teachers to start transitioning to more facilitation instead of direct teaching, and higher level questioning instead of fact recall. The study offers that same message from a different population; the population of those who sit in their classes.

For administrators, the study creates validation of their message of change, and possible focus points for staff development. As administrators push teachers to reflect on new state testing practices and alignment with the CCSS, the study adds the student voice to the conversation. The student voice is reiterating the administrator’s message: facilitate active learning instead of simply presenting information to be remembered. The participants in the study echo the sentiment of the current reform movement, and have been able to identify specific ways to adjust. Administrators should realize that not all teachers are equipped to change their lesson plans to best engage gifted learners. Targeted staff development training in higher level questioning, facilitation of class discussion, and classroom management strategies should be a focus.

Limitations

While the researcher felt satisfied with the insight gained from the study, and the participants validated much of the research found prior to the start, it is important to note the small sample size, and the limitations imposed by the study parameters.

Of the 129 students who met the desired participant profile, only 23 were included in the findings. The research site enrolled over 3,000 students during the year studied, so the responses are from a very small percentage of the overall school. The researcher had hoped for more participation in the online portion of the survey in order to create additional quantifiable data, as
well as a larger overall participant number. Having only twelve on-line survey respondents
created limited data for the Likert scale questions.

The focus on the experiences and perceptions of gifted, male students creates a void in
comparative data from non-gifted and female students. In finding that particular activities help
this particular population, there is not a balanced report from other types of students who are also
enrolled in the classes. While the study provided insight on class planning in the way of more
discussion, larger ideas, and creation of knowledge, it cannot be assumed that these activities
appeal only to the target population. Further study among all types of students could lead to
findings that say these activities appeal to all students, or that these activities are detrimental to
other groups. The parameters of the student profile for the target sample creates a voice for
them, but leaves out the voices of others.

In addition, the findings are based on a small sample group from a middle class, large
high school in southern California. The data collected, and themes found within cannot
necessarily be generalized to all students in all learning environments. All the participants attend
the same school and share teachers who practice within a certain school culture and around
certain priorities and programs. The potential limitation with this population is a shared
experience which may be different at other school sites.

Validity

The validity of the study is primarily based in how open the respondents were with their
answers, and how the researcher analyzed and interpreted their reports. The students all met the
parameters laid out for the research, and each voluntarily participated in the conversations. The
general mood during the focus groups was congenial, sometimes playful, and the boys did not
seem to be timid about sharing their opinions. The researcher maintained open ended questions,
and asked each participant if they wanted to add anything not brought up in the pre-planned questions at the end of each focus group.

One risk in this type of research is for participants to frame their responses so as to help the researcher or confirm findings. The researcher introduced the topic for the study as simply getting insight from students regarding all types of experiences in school. Only three of the participants knew the researcher from previous years or other situations, and there were not obvious signs that they tried to adjust their answers to fit the researcher’s needs.

Another risk, which was observed during the focus groups was the tendency for participants to simply agree with those who were more outspoken. In each group there was at least one, if not two gentlemen who spoke more than the rest, and often led the group with their answers. Many times, a student would begin their answer with “I agree with ____” and then add their own thoughts to the dialogue. The researcher was careful to ask for elaboration when someone said “yeah, I think that, too” and requested that each student give final thoughts at the end, as opposed to only free flowing conversation.

In analyzing and interpreting the data, the researcher took steps to ensure thorough evaluation of ideas and responses. The transcripts were read several times, each with a different purpose for reading, and each ending in a more in-depth understanding of how the themes presented themselves. The open ended nature of the questions lead to various ideas coming forward, each later grouped with like responses.

It is important to note that the researcher has been working at the high school level as a teacher and administrator for fourteen years. This experience led to the topic of the research and creates some bias as responses about class activities and teacher decisions were discussed. The research questions themselves create a basic understanding that the researcher is approaching the
topic from a critical standpoint in that they ask about how things could have been different. The participants understood that the researcher was trying to create insight for teachers and schools about their needs, but did not enter into the conversations with agreement or disagreement as responses were given. The researcher was careful to remain neutral in her probing or secondary questions within the focus groups.

Future Research

In the literature review process for the study, it was noted that while there is ample research on the educational experiences and needs of boys, and a fair amount of research in the educational experiences and needs of gifted students, there is not a significant amount of studies that combined the two traits. As research in the biology and brain mapping of different gender experiences continues it would behoove the educational field to further study the needs of gifted students from a gender standpoint. The problem of practice and significance of the study sections point out that reaching and engaging the gifted population in our schools could have a positive impact on communities and society, if there is an increase in our brightest minds going on to higher education.

To create additional validity and insight for school personnel, larger sample sizes within a variety of school sites would be beneficial. While themes were clear, and the participants were open about their experiences, information for teachers would be more generalizable, and therefore more widely accepted by teachers, with a larger study size.

Researcher Reflection

From the start of my doctoral program, any time I spoke to people about what I planned to study, everyone had a story that related to my topic. To hear people talk about their sons, their brothers or even themselves within the subject of smart boys not achieving was to know that this
issue is widespread and has run rampant in our schools for a long time. To tell them about the data that shows how poorly boys are doing in our country today and see their surprise shows the lack of information that is present in the public. To see these boys continue to sit in my classes, and to talk to them about their experiences drives me to find the credibility, the data and the venue to share this issue with anyone that will listen. What Alex started as my passion back in 2005, I will continue to pursue for the remainder of my professional career. I look forward to sharing my findings with those at my site, those in my district, and those who are looking for a focus for reform.
References


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Appendix

Survey Questions

1. Grade level    9, 10, 11, 12

2. Number of classes in which you earned a C or below last year
   - One
   - Two-Three
   - Four or more

3. I am intelligent enough to do well (B or better) in all of my assigned classes should I chose to.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
   Comments: ______________________________________________________

4. I consider most of the work in my classes to be easy for me.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
   Comments: ______________________________________________________

5. I prefer assignments that challenge my thinking.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
   Comments: ______________________________________________________

6. It is easy for me to learn new things if I am interested in them.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
   Comments: ______________________________________________________

7. I am willing to do assignments that are based on information I already know just to get good grades.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
   Comments: ______________________________________________________

8. All of my teachers understand my needs as an intelligent student.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
   Comments: ______________________________________________________

9. For classes in which I received a grade of C or lower, I would have done better if…

10. In classes where I get the highest grades, I feel it is because…
Focus Group Protocol

As students enter, they were given a writing prompt and ten minutes to describe an experience in which they did poorly in a class for which they feel they could have done well in if they cared to.

Upon completion of the writing, I introduced:

- Purpose of the study - To better understand the factors that contribute to highly capable male students earning grades of C or lower in high school classes.
- Qualitative studies – Participant’s verbal and written responses are the data sources for the study.
- Researcher - I am an English teacher on site, and a doctoral student researching why some highly capable males earn low grades in order to offer some insight to teachers.
- Process - I will be recording all responses, and asking follow up and probing questions to increase depth of the information.
- Participation - I encourage all students to be as candid and specific as possible as they describe their experiences. Participation is voluntary.
- Anonymity - Names will not be reported in the research, and findings will not be presented to teachers until next year.

My role is to do the following

- Ask open ended questions to engage participant response.
- Ask follow up questions to gain clarification on key points raised in discussion
- Provide clarification of questions if needed
- Encourage participation from all group members
- Remind the group of confidentiality and respect of others
- Record all responses
  - Please start by saying your name to ensure that I attribute answers to the correct speaker
  - Try to avoid speaking over each other during responses

Are there any questions before we get started?

Focus Group Questions*:

1. Looking back over what you wrote today, please describe the key factors that influenced you at a time where you earned a grade of C or lower…

2. Thinking back on last year, or considering your time in school so far this year, what things influence the grades you earn?


4. Please describe your experiences, good and bad, with the tasks and assignments that teachers assign to you.
5. What would have to happen in a class and/or what would a teacher have to do to ensure you were engaged and did well in a class.

6. Are there any other topics you wish to discuss in relation to underachievement?