

# Using Life Story Research in Gifted Education: Part Two: Results, Synthesis, and Discussion

Lori J. Flint  
*East Carolina University*

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### Recommended Citation

Flint, Lori J. (2010) "Using Life Story Research in Gifted Education: Part Two: Results, Synthesis, and Discussion," *Gifted Children*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/giftedchildren/vol4/iss1/2>

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In the Winter 2009 edition of this e-journal, *Gifted Children*, I discussed the rationale for and methodology of how, over a period of about ten years, I collected or supervised the collection of life stories of nearly 80 gifted men and women who formerly underachieved, but who now consider themselves successful adults (Flint, 2009). For nearly a century, parents, educators, and psychologists have been acutely aware of a group of students whose academic performance does not correlate with their ability. Examine any discussion in the gifted literature regarding the need for additional research, and the subject of underachievement by high-ability students is present (National Research Center on Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT), 2009; Niehart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002; Robinson, 2006; Schober, Reimann, & Wagner, 2004). As researchers, we studied (and continue to study) this phenomenon, and worked primarily to discover ways to “cure” underachievement, all without much apparent, large-scale success. In fact, if one listens to parents, educators in schools, and people on the street, it seems underachievement still exists and is increasing at an alarming rate, especially among young male students.

Most research into the troublesome problem of underachievement has focused on either one or a few issues that together comprise an encyclopedic body of research. However, since underachievement remains a concern in schools and society and is now recognized as a multifaceted problem it seemed logical to investigate it as such, first as a whole, then deconstructed into its component parts, and concluded with a synthesis of the data into a new understanding of the problem.

Despite decades of research regarding gifted underachievement and its causes, consequences, and interventions, we have yet to eliminate the syndrome. Most studies have examined underachievement from outside the student, but two studies have retrospectively examined underachievement from the formerly underachieving and now successful student’s point of view (Emerick, 1992; Peterson, 2001). These studies have corroborated findings of other researchers regarding timing and factors associated with change (Baker, Bridger, & Evans, 1998; Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995), as well as contributed new information regarding the significance of interactions between factors.

In my initial study of this phenomenon (Flint, 2002), and as discussed in my earlier article in the Winter 2009 edition of this e-journal, I used purposive sampling to choose four prospective participants representative of intensity samples (Patton, 2002) of chronic underachievers or those who underachieved over a multi-year period (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Intensity samples, or those that are neither extreme cases of the phenomenon under study nor marginal ones, are, instead, intense exemplars from which we can learn.

By collecting and then examining each participant’s story as an individual case study as well as a part of a cross-case analysis, greater reliability and perhaps generalizability were applicable to the findings (Merriam, 1988), because patterns emerging through the study of individual life stories or case studies help strengthen the internal validity of research. The four original participants included two men and two women, with ages ranging from 30 to 54. Since then, 72 additional participants, with ages ranging from 27 to 61, were added to the study for a total of 76 participants. Each participant chose his or her own pseudonym by which to be known in the research, except for Karin who deliberately insisted on being known by her own name.

Because the literature has shown differences in the experiences of underachievement between males and females, this study has equal representation of both sexes. Participants came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, races, ages, ethnicities, religions, and geographic areas, so as to glean the greatest amount of information about the largest possible variety of individuals. Questionnaires and transcripts of semi-structured interviews described individuals’ experiences of underachievement and subsequent success. The goal was not to answer a priori hypotheses, but to strive for emic understanding of the phenomenon of underachievement transformed into success – understanding drawn from participants’ own stories and their interpretations of the truth embedded within those stories. The purpose of this study was to uncover, through life-story research, how some gifted individuals (who significantly underachieved while students) were able to eventually overcome their problems and become high-achieving adult citizens.

I began this study with two main clusters of questions, with the first examining how it was that some gifted individuals (who significantly underachieved while students) were able to eventually overcome their problems and become high-achieving adult citizens. Related to that question are others: What factor(s) do they perceive as being critical to their success? Was there some particular moment when they suddenly decided to change? Did they change, or did factors outside themselves change? Do they attribute their current self-fulfilled state to their own hard work, or to others’ interventions? What was the route by which participants’ proceeded from underachievement to success?

The second cluster is: to what do gifted individuals who significantly underachieved attribute their former achievement problems? Other, related questions are: Were there particular environmental, intrapersonal, or societal factors they felt “caused” the problem(s)? Why do they feel interventions aimed at reversing the underachievement failed? If they had the opportunity to go back and be students

again, would they? If they were able to control all external and internal factors, would they do anything differently? Do these individuals wish they had become achievers at an earlier age, or do they perceive benefits from their experiences, no matter how negative?

Data were analyzed by case, by gender, and across all cases. Similarities and differences were investigated, and the findings were drawn from questionnaire data (semi-structured researcher-developed questionnaire), recorded interviews, verbatim transcripts, interviewer notes, and telephone and email contacts.

## Findings

The data generated by this study are extensive. Hundreds of hours of audio, reams and boxes of paper, and myriad electronic files provide insight into why students underachieve and how to help them become more successful at both academics and life. The findings can be arranged into three distinct categories: (a) individual characteristics of the participants, such as gender and cultural, social, and psychological/intrapersonal factors; (b) educational factors such as curriculum, teachers, and environment; and (c) familial characteristics, including parenting.

### Findings Related to Individual Characteristics

I had no trouble recruiting females for participation in this study, despite underachievement being described in papers and books as a problem related mostly to boys. In classes I took as a doctoral student in gifted education, we were taught a commonly held assumption in the field – that for every girl who underachieved, three or four boys did. In fact, it seems more likely that boys and girls underachieve at approximately equal rates, but that they do so for different reasons, and in different ways.

Based upon the experiences of all the females in this study, the two women below are good examples of how females typically underachieve: they do so covertly, under the radar, while keeping the peace within the family and classroom. These two female participants also found it necessary to attempt to hide their intelligence early on, as they discovered being overly intelligent led to severe social consequences. And, like the other women in this study, they experienced intense sadness at not usually having friends like themselves until high school, confusion about not understanding the whole social game, and frustration at not having anyone to teach them how to succeed socially.

Here, two female participants describe their experience with underachievement. First, Karin:

...underachievement went undetected by my teachers. My parents know I didn't study at home. And my dad just [recently] told me none of us kids did. And neither did he when he was young. He said we all could have studied more. By grading standards I was successful. By true measure of potential I was a far cry from what I could have been. Looking back, it's surprising, that my parents never saw what was really going on with me—hiding out in my room, terrible attitude, depression, writing poem after poem. And ... I was just lazy.

Dawn discussed, "Hidden underachievement all my life. Made B's without studying but no one dealt with it. Mom didn't do anything about it, Dad didn't know or care."

My data also revealed an unexpected finding regarding females who underachieve. Approximately 25% of the women (n=10) disclosed during interviews that they had been sexually abused on at least one occasion and that they could see in retrospect the impact that abuse had had on their school achievement. Each of these women said they had never before revealed this information to anyone else, and that they felt they had had a burden removed from them by disclosing this information. While this statistic mirrors the prevalence of female sexual abuse in the general population, which indicates one in four females is sexually abused before age 18 (Trickett, McBride-Chang, & Putnam, 1994), it is illuminating because sexual or other abuse and its impact on achievement is rarely mentioned in literature about gifted students.

While the girls went underground with their underachievement, boys generally took the opposite route; findings suggest that showing off superior intelligence was rewarding and socially more acceptable for males than females. Both males boasted of their attempts to win others over to their worldview of school—Casey in his non-conformist fashion and Guido in a more blatant manipulative role. Casey, now an attorney in Houston, said about challenge:

Well, when I'd hit a wall, and instead of stopping and evaluating the wall and trying to go over the wall, I'd start looking for cracks in the wall and unfortunately the nature of the system and everything else, and what people allow you to do I was able to. So I didn't have to go over the wall, I went under the wall; I went through the wall. And not through the wall, not break down the wall, but if there was a crack in the wall, I'd fit through it! And at one point, I used to think that was a signature of my brilliance, 'cause I didn't have to go over the wall, I could find another way through. I could beat the system. Then I realized, you don't really beat the system; if you don't work with the system, you get left behind. Yeah, I still like to... I still have some of that characteristic. Oh, hell, yeah. If I needed to dodge something, well, I can dodge it. I can dodge it with the best of 'em.

Guido discusses how he felt about being smart and having the ability to manipulate people and situations:

Yeah, whatever I could sit down and do the night before a big project was due, I'd do. I remember these two big projects ... there was this was high school physics project. They had a solar energy project, that's back in the ... the green days, ecology; you had to create a solar energy project that worked. And that was the grade—if it worked you got an "A." We divided up into groups, and I got someone in my group that was the school's 'head.' You know just he and I. He would come to school high every morning, and I said ahhh don't

worry about it. I wouldn't tell him what our project was and he was like shouldn't we be doing ... and everybody else was like making these houses and making the piping and just everything you could imagine, and doing all kinds of things like solar cookers and doing the designs, and drawing 'em all, and I said, "don't worry about it ... we got it handled... we got a solar energy project."

So you know the big day comes and everybody brings their projects up to school, and David and I, we don't have anything. I probably told David and he said, "Yeah, cool." And so ... so, they did all their presentations and I told the teacher I want to do mine last. Let everybody else do theirs and I want to do my solar energy project last. Now I didn't have anything with me, and he couldn't figure out why, uh, you know, how I was going to do a solar energy project when we were carrying nothing. And so everybody did theirs and they said, "Okay now let's see yours now, Guido." So I pulled a string out of my pocket, we're up on the roof of the school, where everybody had their little things set up, there were probably ten or fifteen projects, and I tied the string between the two little fences they had, you know, the guard rails, and I hung a sock on the string, and I said, "there, a solar clothes dryer." It worked. He was very irritated. It worked, so he had to give me an "A" on it.

The behaviors Casey and Guido described are typical for many gifted boys who underachieve, and emerged repeatedly in my other case studies. To the dismay of many of their parents and teachers, their boys often gleefully expend more time and effort on trying to beat the system than they do on trying to achieve within that system.

Other themes that arose in the abundant data were an awareness of being different from peers of the same age, for both boys and girls; an unwillingness to prove oneself to others, sometimes at any cost; a strong motivation to learn (but not necessarily what school was offering); a paradoxical intellectual self-confidence, even in the face of blatant evidence of underachievement or even failure; a precocious sense of self-reliance, often misplaced; and evidence of psychic overexcitabilities or overintensities (Dabrowski, 1964; Piechowski, 1979), identifiable in the data based upon reported behaviors.

When asked if they wished they had taken a different path to their success, participants often expressed regret at the choices they had made, but felt their experiences had made them the strong, resilient human beings they were now. As one put it, "I only have regrets about what could have been. But those regrets do not overwhelm my ability to be thankful for today and to look forward to the future."

A final note on individual characteristics: Many participants reported having to disaffiliate from negative factors or persons in their lives before they could move toward success. This sometimes meant having to go far, far away from

relatives, even well-meaning parents; having to change peer groups; or having to make a major geographic move from a neighborhood and everyone in it.

### Findings Related to Educational Issues

School, for all participants, was viewed both positively and negatively, but primarily negatively. Each participant reported problems from beginning to end – getting in trouble for perceived lack of self-control, talking out in classes, challenging teachers, or coming across as "smart-mouth" kids. All persistently suffered for not completing homework or for not playing by the rules, trying instead to manipulate the system, in spite of knowing that they would be punished for their transgressions. Dawn remarked:

I didn't like the regimentation of school. It was a mass approach, and I'm not a mass type person ... One side of your report card had grades, and the other had, I guess they called it conduct. There was this thing called self-control and if you got a check that was bad, and I always had checks all the way across self-control. If you challenged, or said anything, you were thought of as intrusive.

Karin, now an art teacher, said, "I think that I'm very ... I look for the meaning, you know. I like ... authentic, and school was never that to me."

Each of the participants expressed awareness of certain deficits in knowledge or skills, and their wishes that someone had helped them in those areas. Whether about how to make friends, be more organized, or better play the school game, tacit knowledge has been pointed out as being critical to the success of gifted underachievers. These individuals were no different. However, once they figured out what they needed to do, they assimilated the knowledge quickly, in typical gifted fashion. Participants also noted a lack of intellectual peers with whom to regularly interact, making the school day a stultifying experience. A persistent lack of mutual respect between teacher and student often led to punitive measures being meted out on students, and students rebelling as a result. Students rejected the rote and repetitive and were intolerant of others' ignorance.

Participants from non-dominant populations, and women from any population, reported finding little of interest in the curriculum, and often felt marginalized in their classrooms. These same people tended to report that pressure to conform led to feeling a lack of psychological safety in school. As for the data related to culture and underachievement – they are so extensive they need to be treated in an additional, separate paper.

### Findings Related to Family and Parenting

While much more research needs to be conducted with families of gifted achieving and underachieving students in order to pinpoint factors that specifically affect academic and other achievement, certain patterns have already emerged in my research and others' work. Whitmore (1980) surmised that conflict generated by students' underachieving behaviors created a great deal of stress in the home and in familial relationships, which was repeated in my case studies. And, though these children who were underachieving intensely disliked the conflicts generated, they did not or could not just

change their behaviors to eliminate it. Additionally, my participants reported parents being first concerned about the child's underachievement, then frustrated, resulting in ongoing arguing in their families, and what Mandel and Marcus (1988) referred to as "less positive affect, and more internal conflict." This finding left me wondering whether the underachievement created the family stress or the stress helped create the underachievement.

Participants in this study also had parents who tended toward the laissez-faire, or somewhat neglectful, parenting style, which fits with previous research that suggests parents of underachievers also lean more toward punishment than discipline (Clark, 1983), and have either a more authoritarian parenting style, or a more lenient one (Pendarvis, Howley, & Howley, 1990; Weiner, 1994), rather than the authoritative style that promotes high achievement. These families frequently did not behave in a manner that encouraged the appropriate taking of risks, or the development of high self-concept (Gurman, 1970).

Since little, if anything, has been either studied or written about parents who display this laissez-faire parenting style and how it impacts student achievement, more research is needed to examine the similarities and differences in families of all types and parenting styles. Because this study includes similar findings from a wide variety of case studies, one might surmise that a family in which both parents are busy working to ensure the survival of the family creates the same set of negative circumstances and low student achievement status as a family in which both parents are busy working for status reasons or to provide children with extensive material possessions. When parents were not present for the latter two reasons, participants specifically reported: (a) being left alone for long stretches of time while parents worked or volunteered outside the home, or (b) feeling isolated from other family members because each person had their own televisions, toys, and other belongings in their own rooms, rather than having to negotiate or share them with one another.

In the majority of these 76 participants' families, one parent was often either physically or emotionally absent, leaving the other parent to struggle for survival, with few emotional and/or financial resources with which to nurture a child's gifts. When the gifted child assumed the role of caretaker in the family, it often led to a precocious self-reliance that seems to have served as a protective factor that helped lead to the person's eventually becoming a high achiever.

Respondents in this study typically reported a love of and respect for learning in their families, though it was not necessarily a love of or respect for school. Participants discussed being taught to be critical thinkers at home, but that this same trait was not generally valued or appreciated in school. This meant that children reared in homes where lack of respect for educational institutions or teachers was openly voiced tended toward underachievement (Jeon & Feldhusen, 1993). Parents who praised for ability rather than effort, giving children the message that hard work is unimportant, were also more likely to produce underachievers (Kaufman, Harrel, Milam, Woolverton, & Miller, 1986; Rimm, 1995; Rimm & Lowe, 1988).

Finally, participants reported that intelligence was often taken for granted at home, so these gifted children, in most cases,

were not seen as being any different from any of the other intelligent people in the family. In other words, everyone in that family was smart, so quite often, parents just treated their children according to who they were and the characteristics they displayed, instead of who they were supposed to be based upon chronological age.

Like Rimm and Lowe (1988) and Fine and Pitts (1980), I found that empowering children too early, a phenomenon not uncommon with precocious children in adult environments, frequently led to discord within the family. Once the parents attempted to reclaim authority in the household, underachievement ensued as a form of rebellion, especially in the male participants of this study. This over-empowerment also resulted in mixed messages between home and school, creating confusion in the child about how they were supposed to behave where.

The data in my study supported all the aforementioned findings on family, but also provided additional insights. The first was that while parents were well meaning and the vast majority of them inculcated strong values, a strong work ethic, and expectations of appropriate behaviors in their children, many of these parents needed help in dealing with their gifted children and did not know where or how to find it.

There are obviously numerous ways in which family and parents influence students' achievement status. Abundant research (e.g., Baker, Bridger, & Evans, 1998; Emerick, 1992; Peterson, 2001; Rimm & Lowe, 1988; Zilli, 1971) suggests that students' home environments exert considerable impact on the type of achievement patterns they develop. A family's communication style, education level, parenting style, consistency of expectations and discipline, and organization within the home are just a few of the many factors that affect the success or failure of gifted children (Goldberg & Associates, 1965; Laffoon et al., 1989; McClelland, Atkinson, Clarke, & Lowell, 1953; Raph et al., 1966; Rimm, 1987; Rimm & Lowe, 1988).

### **Synthesis, Discussion, & Implications**

The data in this study include both individual and cross-case findings. These results have been organized into a framework logically drawn from the data, and not designed to fit a particular pattern, and they show that change happened when each individual was ready to embrace it, after having hit bottom psychologically, financially, and otherwise. These individuals attributed improved performance primarily to their own behaviors and the decisions they made later in life, including a deliberate choice to change. Love of learning and a desire for challenge led to formal education acting as a yardstick by which to measure success as well as a means of achieving newly developed goals. Secondary attribution was granted to significant others, challenging teachers, the opportunity to help others, and the general development of a personal support system. While many of these individuals lacked mentors throughout childhood, several had significant adults available at one time or another, which seem to have served as protective factors over the long term.

### **The Choice to Change**

Change was described by every participant as a conscious and memorable choice, with each participant able to clearly remember and articulate both the time and context of the

decision to reverse their achievement status. Yet, despite choosing to reverse their underachieving characteristics to achievement-oriented behaviors, core personality attributes such as overexcitabilities (OEs) and values remained the same. The decision to change came after periods of intense internal conflict and hitting bottom, including thoughts of suicide and substance abuse leading to what Dabrowski (1964) called positive disintegration. These participants were at various levels of personality development, but each has attained a different degree of positive adjustment in his or her life.

The three major factors that play into achievement status – individual characteristics, educational issues, and familial issues – were discussed above as categories. All participants reported early onset problems related to these categories as well as the expression of psychic overexcitabilities in school and lack of ability to adapt to the social norms, otherwise known as positive maladjustment.

To paint a portrait of the typical participant in this research, envision problems with social issues, including few sustained close relationships with anyone. Each participant came from a family where intelligence, learning (though not necessarily formal education), good behavior, and a strong work ethic were valued, though little actual time or effort was spent developing those values. Self-reliance was a valued commodity in each family. Tacit knowledge was desired, though not regularly taught either in school or at home. Additionally, each mentioned a lack of educational goals in childhood and youth. Locus of control, or attribution for success and or failure, was strictly internal; all blame for failure and credit for success was theirs alone. Motivation was also internal, leading to a lack of success with typical external motivators such as grades, punishment, or rewards.

### Lessons Learned

All participants held exceedingly high standards for themselves, which could be considered perfectionism, a known attribute of many gifted individuals (Adderholdt Adderholdt and Goldberg, 1999; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 1987). Each participant also discussed high self-confidence, rather than the usual low self-confidence generally mentioned when discussing underachievement (Borkowski, 1992; McCoach & Siegle, 2003).

At the onset of this study, only one of the participants, Casey, was able to state what factors caused his underachievement. He felt it was due primarily to his own inability to conform, and secondarily, to his mother's enabling behaviors. The others had moments of illumination arising from the narrative process: Dawn explained that she had never before thought of her school performance as being related to her family's issues. Guido's reaction when he realized through narrative process that his mother had been in survival mode most of the time, and that he might have a drinking problem, was a startled look and a quick transition to the next subject. Karin, though upset with her family's non-recognition of her traumatic experience, had never before linked her school performance to that issue. She had always previously put the blame on herself.

Interventions for these individuals were minimal and never succeeded, because they did not address the particular areas of need of each student. Though each participant was

retrospectively aware of the help they had needed, as children they were less clear on the subject and appeared to feel that asking for help was a sign of weakness, and therefore not an option. Though all participants except Guido expressed regrets over lost time and experiences, none of them would go back and eliminate those hardships. Each felt their struggles had made them stronger, more capable individuals – again, consistent with Dabrowski's theories and the concept of personal growth through conflict.

### Discussion

The intense experience of life seen through a clearer lens brings with it a comprehension of how life should or could be relative to how it often is. Young gifted children begin school motivated and excited about new opportunities to engage in a favorite pastime: learning. Instead of being a haven for learners, school often winds up being a place where learning takes a back seat to the teaching of social conformity, with offerings designed for the masses and not tailored to students' particular needs. Good self-concept and appropriate social and emotional adjustment, when combined with overexcitabilities, may lead to conflicts with other individuals in school (Kitano, 1990), especially when respect for individuals and their differences is lacking. The resulting internal disharmony can make life very uncomfortable for the child. Intellectual peers are often in short supply, as exceptional children are frequently divided into many classrooms rather than clustered together in a few in order to share the intellectual wealth. Feeling different, socially isolated, and sometimes ostracized as know-it-alls, these children attempt to develop protective coloration so as to better blend into the background of school.

The stronger the intensity, the more difficult it is to conceal successfully. Many of the findings in this study relate directly back to characteristics of gifted individuals with overexcitabilities or overintensities (Dabrowski, 1964; Piechowski, 1979). Life can be difficult for gifted children and adults who possess these psychic overexcitabilities (OEs) or intensities (Kitano, 1990). For example, those participants who expressed impatience with peers, desire for non-conformity, and focus on abstract ideas frustrated teachers and other students with this display of the intellectual OE.

Girls learn to silently underachieve while appearing to be successful, while many boys openly perform intellectual feats for which they receive validation from others. Unfortunately, though these children may attempt to apply protective strategies in an effort to salvage their psyches, they often are not inherently equipped with the tacit knowledge (or survival skills) such as self-regulation or self-discipline, metacognitive thinking, or study skills with which to effectively do so (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995; Reis, Hébert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995).

The idea that children who possess high intelligence will intuitively acquire necessary survival skills is now considered to be one of the great myths of gifted education (Berger, 1989). Bright children need to be taught strategies for success just like everyone else. Assimilated quickly into the student's strategic repertoire, deliberately taught survival skills, including metacognitive strategies; self-regulatory strategies; or study skills addressing such areas as organization, time management and leadership can make the difference between a successful gifted child and an unsuccessful one.

Those home environments where intelligence is a predictable commodity, education is valued, responsibility is expected, and a firm value system is in place would seem to promote high academic motivation. Emotional growth can be facilitated when parents act as mediators between children and the rest of society (Robinson, 1998). But, when families are too busy – parents are overwhelmed with outside responsibilities, are busy simply surviving, or otherwise disconnected from their children – achievement motivation suffers. These families, described earlier as disinvolved, or, in psychological terms, as uninvolved, neglectful, or laissez-faire families, often appear normal and well adjusted to the casual observer. The truth, however, was that in such families, as long as everyone maintained an appropriate social profile and was being at least moderately successful, the parenting style was generally hands-off.

Healthy parent-child interactions, however, include the deliberate teaching of survival skills such as metacognitive strategies, study skills, goal-setting, or self-regulation. In the families I studied, this purposeful teaching was not happening regularly for a variety of reasons and the children were either unaware of the need for these, or viewed asking for help as a sign of weakness. The statistics are grim for children in these families: higher levels of high school drop-outs, more substance abuse, and lower performance across all domains, not just academics, is often the result (Baumrind, 1989; Darling & Steinberg, 1993), particularly for boys (Weiss & Schwarz, 1996).

#### **From Underachievement to Success**

Elementary school years, though not particularly intellectually challenging, tended to be socially challenging. Fairly easy work, relatively low expectations, and easily maintained grades allowed the child to appear successful with little effort. Homework, however, was a major sticking point, with male students refusing to do work they perceived as useless, and females doing the barest minimum to maintain the appearance of achievement.

Participants in this study discussed teachers and students engaging in what was familiarly known as The Game. Increasingly draconian techniques for forcing conformity pitted teachers against students and their maddening methods of work avoidance. If the teacher was able to make the child work, she won. If the child avoided doing his work, he won. Teachers were generally capable and decent, though some bitterly resented students who refused to play The Game. According to study participants, those teachers were considered to hate children, leading students to wonder why they were even teaching in the first place. Students who displayed negative attitudes toward school, negative feelings about teachers, and little goal-directedness were found to be at greater risk for underachievement, and this is supported by other research (Reis & McCoach, 2000).

Family life was outwardly normal, often with both parents working and one parent, usually the father, largely absent. Children became self-reliant as a result of hours spent alone in an empty house, or after stressed mothers retired early, leaving no one in charge of the house. This is in no way a criticism of single parents, as parents in intact families can be physically present but still be psychologically unavailable.

Junior high school brought its own set of issues: typical adolescent concerns coupled with those unique to gifted students, such as overexcitabilities that, though marginally better concealed by this age, made life difficult for their owners. Those who were in gifted classes fared somewhat better socially, due to inclusion in an established group with which they traveled through school. Academics became increasingly difficult to master without doing homework. Students invented even more devious methods for avoiding compliance, patterns of underachievement were firmly established, and ignorant or intolerant teachers were considered fair game. Students were sometimes aware of being smarter than their teachers during these years.

Greater variety in academic offerings and the occasional inspired teacher made high school a somewhat better place for all four original participants, and nearly all subsequent cases. New students assimilated into the existing peer structure meant a greater likelihood for locating like-minded friends. Described as lifesavers, students' involvement in band, clubs, and other extracurricular activities provided opportunities for challenge and success outside the classroom.

Way and Rossman (1996) called the family the place where children learn to interpret reality. Laissez-faire parenting, with its minimal supervision and few questions asked, provided little opportunity for interpretation of reality. It also provided possibilities for increased independence from home, and more occasions for mischief, such as drinking and unproductive hanging-out. Older siblings, friends' families and extracurricular activities such as Scouts and marching band sometimes served as home bases, though entrenched negative behaviors and lack of coping skills contributed to cognitive dissonance that carried beyond school and into the world at large.

Intense psychological pain and pervasive feelings of wrongness were dealt with through substance abuse, eating disorders, frequent family relocation with often inappropriate school placements (Flint, 2002), and continual changes in peer groups to the point where suicide was either considered or actually attempted. First attempts at college were dismal. Lack of study skills or other effective, achievement-promoting behaviors finally caught up with these individuals. Deep-rooted patterns of underachievement led to failures in school and in life. High school extracurricular activities disappeared with nothing to replace them. The realization dawned that one's career, formerly considered a matter of choice, might actually be limited by previous flawed decisions.

Continued substance abuse, financial troubles, intensifying psychic pain, and lowered parental expectations regarding academic ability introduced other elements to the mix: anger and doubt. Students' anger was the result of others' predictions that the students would never become achievers. The potent mix of anger, alcohol, self-pity, and financial and academic problems created its own problem: hitting bottom. Hitting bottom meant crawling back to the family home after failing college. Hitting bottom was having a nervous breakdown after years of hidden alcoholism and eating disorders. Hitting bottom was reaching a state of such psychic pain, such internal dissonance, that suicide was considered the only means for alleviating the pain. But doubt born of anger saved the day. Doubt led to metacognitive thinking: "maybe I have got to prove I am smart; maybe I

cannot really achieve whatever I set my mind to. Maybe I do need to change. And, just maybe, I need to do whatever it takes to effect permanent lasting change and prove to myself and everyone else that I am a success."

Reversal to achievement status began in a particular crystallizing moment—a moment when the need for both change and a new direction to follow became clear. A significant person could help provide motivation to continue in the right direction. The high personal standards, sense of responsibility, and strong work ethic internalized in childhood worked in combination with the autonomous choice (Dabrowski's Third Factor) (Dabrowski, 1972) to change. Personal inventories were taken, and deficits remedied. Hard truths and tacit knowledge gleaned through the school of hard knocks provided self-assurance.

Education, once reviled, played a key role in change. College was successfully completed, sometimes only after multiple attempts. New-found determination led to a refusal to quit no matter how difficult things got. The high expectations of at least one special professor, and his or her refusal to accept less than the student's best, helped push the student, first grudgingly, then gladly, into achievement. Self-directed learning, often disregarded in lower schools, was a valued commodity in the colleges where students eventually achieved success. Andragogy, the science of adult learning, promoted more equal relationships between teacher and learner, and included more varied learning experiences, more choice in materials and methods, and most of all, mutual respect (Robles, 1998). Negative behaviors, abandoned at great personal cost, were replaced by newly synthesized core values. Success bred success, and self-efficacy born of surviving the worst life had to offer gave birth to newly integrated, more highly developed personalities. Individuals once mired in their own personal pain began to seek opportunities for altruism. Personal goals were set, despite new self-doubt, and goal-oriented persistence and intellectually appropriate risk-taking emerged as strategies for success. Individual factors, such as life experience, self-monitoring, positive (self) reinforcement, quality college experiences, and self-motivation all contributed to school success, a finding echoed by Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, and Bradley (2000).

Together, these characteristics point to a special type of personal growth known as transforming growth. Transforming growth involves self-awareness and self-acceptance, but also moral questioning, self-judgment according to internal values, and a sense of responsibility toward others. Although transformation does occur, its primary goal is not a complete change of the self, but increased self-awareness (Robert, 1984; Robert & Piechowski, 1980). Women who undergo this transformation tend to change their view of success to one that reflects service to others as the primary goal (Cohen, 1998). Social networks were formed and often included a significant other who was willing to alternately push and encourage during the change process, as needed. Instantly recognized gifted peers who shared intensities, or kindred spirits, were integrated into the social network.

Psychic overexcitabilities, though still present, were submerged when their presence was less than desirable. Combining original core values with new strategies and

intelligence resulted in empowered individuals who were ready to successfully confront new challenges. No longer foolish or naïve, individuals now approached The Game far more effectively, with an understanding of how to beat The System with its own rules, as E. Paul Torrance mentions in his *Manifesto for Children* (1983). Life continued, bringing with it the usual challenges.

Better equipped to deal with crises, individuals were no longer afraid of them. Having endured excruciating hardship, people knew they could do it again and still survive. The disintegration and reintegration from first level to second level (Dabrowski, 1972) was the most severe, most painful experience each had ever known; the equivalent of trial by fire. Instead of being consumed, however, each emerged with newly forged strength tempered by that heat, and a burning desire to succeed.

Gifted underachievement examined within the life-story context provides both big-picture and microscopic views of the myriad elements involved in the phenomenon. As discussed in the Winter edition of this e-journal, *Gifted Children*, fullest understanding of the phenomenon of underachievement by gifted students occurs when a large theoretical framework that includes literature in both the gifted and general education domains and far beyond is applied. Theories of motivation, attribution, learning styles and disabilities, general psychology, cognitive theory, personality theory, and more help explain the factors that engender achievement, but it is the interrelationships between the factors that helps us understand precisely why things go awry. Current information does not fully explain the transformation from underachiever to success; only continued collection of individual stories gathered together within this massive framework will accomplish that goal. Still, one life carefully examined can sometimes provide deeper understanding than a whole host of theories.

### Contributions to the Field

Hattie (1992) asked which came first: low self-esteem or low achievement. Underachievers have traditionally been depicted as lacking in self-esteem, but the individuals in this study surprised me by not lacking confidence in their talents or intellectual capacity; they were well aware of their capabilities, even when others were not. McCoach and Siegle (2001) also arrived at this conclusion, finding that many gifted underachievers have high academic self-concept combined with negative school attitudes and poor survival skills, or skills like metacognitive strategies, self-regulation, or study skills that are needed for school success. Once considered a single global construct, self-concept is currently viewed as multidimensional in character (Fitts, 1991; Piers, 1984; Pyryt & Mendaglio, 1994), encompassing various domains, such as academic, intellectual, physical, and social. For students with high intellectual self-esteem whose families value intellectual pursuits, low-level rote and repetitive educational offerings do not inspire a joy for learning, but instill contempt for the educational system, meaning such students can underachieve and still keep their intellectual self-concept intact.

These findings caution us to first examine the context within which the underachievement is occurring before attempting to reverse it. Only when we understand those factors can we develop appropriate interventions, because one-size-fits-all

intervention plans have little effect on achievement. High intellectual self-esteem coupled with underachievement represents a built-in opportunity for us to provide services designed for intelligent adults who wish to complete rigorous postsecondary work. The best remediation for such students plays on student strengths (i.e., high intellect, personal integrity) while working toward eliminating weaknesses (i.e., poor self-regulation and other survival skills) (Taylor, 2000).

No interventions are effective without the most important one of all: student buy-in to the process. Until a student of any age genuinely wants to succeed, nothing we do will make any permanent difference. Thus, parents, students, and educators must work together, selecting an appropriate variety of techniques and modifications specific to the particular individual and his or her needs. Efficacy of the interventions should be monitored, and changes made as needed, discarding those that are not proving effective and substituting new ones.

Positive maladjustment results when individuals with high developmental potential refuse to conform to standards set by others, and choose to adhere to their own canons, even when it means standing out in painful ways or having to accept undesirable consequences. If the function of the behavior is to preserve the internal integrity and intellectual self-confidence of the individual—a psychologically healthy response—should we pathologize it as underachievement, or instead examine what we could do to change the standards? Whether admirable or reviled, psychic overexcitabilities in gifted individuals are not psychological problems to cure, or even highly sought-after personality characteristics. They just are.

Children with high developmental potential, particularly those with intellectual and emotional overexcitabilities who do not get the help they need, are at risk for longstanding and significant underachievement. Individuals suffer the consequences, but society does too, in terms of undeveloped talent and financial potential. The choice to change occurs in a crystallizing moment, a moment always recalled as decisive: I will do whatever it takes to become successful, thus growing closer to my personality ideal. Permanent change, or positive disintegration, does not happen casually, however; it arises from pain born of crisis or long-standing problems. Sometimes a special teacher, professor, or significant other happens along at just the perfect time to help cement the decision to change. Gifted adults who decide to change often choose academia as a means to the end. Driven to succeed, with high intellectual capacity, large schema born of years of varied experiences, adults who return to school tend to be self-directed, goal-oriented learners who happen to have something to prove: that they can be successful students. Nietzsche said it best, “What does does not kill me, makes me stronger” (Nietzsche, 1888). Anyone who has experienced extreme challenge and lived to tell the story knows what Dabrowski knew: People grow through crisis and hardship and evolve into something better (Dabrowski et al., 1970).

Finally, as helping professionals, we must understand that divorce, isolation from extended family, poorly developed or nonexistent social support networks, families in which both parents work, families struggling just to make ends meet, materialism in affluent homes, and the general speed at which

life is lived today can sometimes all share one result: that of creating disunity within homes and family which, in turn, makes it harder than ever to stay connected as a family. Less family time or other significant mentoring often results in decreased awareness of individual needs and lost opportunities for modeling and teaching survival skills critical for children living with giftedness and related intensity. Without this connectedness, many bright children will simply flounder and fall into a pattern of chronic underachievement, as did these study participants.

If the opportunity somehow arose to change the past, would these former chronic underachievers go back and do things differently? When directly queried about whether they would choose to change the way they lived if given the opportunity to forego their crises and hardships, the answer was an emphatic “NO” among all cases. Even with the pain and challenges, participants would not choose an easier route, because they felt the painful hardships made them the strong, resilient, successful people they are today.

### Benefits and Limitations of the Study

This study indicated a high degree of consistency among the stories, with more similarities than differences between them. It stands to reason that when people with entirely different experiences of giftedness, representing both sexes and with a 30-year spread in age, tell stories of such similarity, they must be of some merit. These stories, purposefully selected, cannot be generalized to all gifted children and adults, but may be considered trustworthy enough to teach important lessons. Each individual’s narrative had a high degree of internal consistency between the interview material, questionnaire data, and follow-up questions and answers; their stories did not change according to what they thought I wanted to hear, nor were they scripted, pat responses.

While the purpose of this study was to learn more about how gifted individuals could move from decades-long, chronic underachievement to being successful adults, respondents also benefitted from their participation in two ways. First, they were able to tell stories of how they first failed, and then eventually triumphed over defeat. Participants were also able to experience some of the cathartic effects of narrative. Given the similarity of life-story research to narrative therapy (White, 1989-90, 1997; White & Epston, 1990) it was not surprising to see the beneficial, potentially therapeutic effects of narrative when each participant, male or female, voiced a sudden clarity regarding their underachievement, a deeper understanding of some family issue, or a new insight into their own behaviors or ideas. And, while each of the participants appeared drained after his or her story-telling session, each also seemed eminently satisfied, leading me to believe s/he had also experienced some of the cathartic effects of narrative.

From this body of research, I developed a preliminary series of focused implications for practice for families, educators, policymakers, and others that could help us better understand and reduce chronic underachievement in bright individuals. These will be covered in my next article, “Using Life-Story Research in Gifted Education: Part Three: Implications for Practice.” ♦

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