Insights From Gifted Adolescents: Implications for Quality Gifted Education

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How do we, as educators, begin to share responsibility for quality gifted education? As documented in this study, including students in program development and implementation shows promise. But this is only a start.

To understand the unique needs of gifted learners, research must focus on the lived experiences, perceptions and expectations these individuals carry within their psyche. Only through continual dialogue and exploration can the needs of gifted learners be adequately identified and appropriately addressed in educational settings.

The purpose of this study was to explore and examine the perceptions, expectations and experiences of gifted individuals as they discussed their role as students at the secondary school level. This manuscript was based on research conducted during a residential program for gifted and talented 9/10th grade students. Participants represented widely divergent socioeconomic levels and types of school attended (rural, urban, suburban, parochial, public and home-school).

Specifically, the following research questions guided the work:

1. How do gifted adolescents describe their lived experiences as students in classroom settings?

2. What comparisons and similarities (if any) can be inferred from these lived experiences?

Significance of the Study

This study directly engaged participants as critical and active components of the education process. Perceptions, expectations and experiences were “captured” and refined to present personally validated stories about their lives as students.

In itself, this approach provides a significant contribution to the sparse literature involving students as active players in education. Moving from the initial focus on gifted
underachievement (Schultz, 1999) to giftedness in general, provides opportunities to begin comparing and contrasting the existing literature base to the lived experiences of individuals identified as gifted. More holistically, the work continues a line of inquiry establishing strong connections between the social/emotional needs of learners and their intellectual success (see Schultz, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2001; 1999).

The Field Setting

Participants were residents of a Summer Honors Institute at a midwestern metropolitan university the summer of 2002. The program consisted of two (2), seven-day residential sessions. Twenty-two (22) participants were in residence the first week of the program; nine (9) were in residence the second week. Interactions and sharing of developing (and developed) cases took place within the two residential groups, but not between.

Participants were involved in academically advanced coursework, taught by university faculty (see Figure 1). Residents chose one of the Institutes and matriculated through the week based on the specified curriculum. Institutes lasted from 9:00 am until 4:00 pm each day. Evening activities provided interactions between all Institute participants. We took part in concerts, attended minor league baseball games, and explored issues related to adolescence and giftedness as a large group. Although the program was intended to be high-powered academically, I felt the program also needed to be socially and emotionally safe for participants to excel and become actively engaged in exploring their abilities.

In addition, dorm counselors provided mentoring and shared their life experiences regarding college life to residents. Meals were in the university dining facility, with the director (researcher) and faculty in attendance at each meal.
The many impromptu conversations, and shared mealtimes provided opportunities for everyone to become well acquainted and share personal stories and reflections. These activities were integral to negotiating respect and a sense of acceptance for all involved. We were in the program together; and, able to talk openly about many issues without being judged by others.

This environment was planned as a way to provide connections for these gifted individuals. Seldom do they have peer connections at their home schools where they are accepted and acknowledged for their interests and other gifts—rather than being labeled nerd, geek, dweeb or dork by peers.

Participants

Participants were artistically and/or academically gifted based on application materials (which adhered to the State’s guidelines for identification of the gifted and talented). Advanced courses in performing arts; creativity and creative writing; the Law; and, computer graphics provided opportunities for gifted adolescents to explore affective as well as academic components of the curriculum. This was a central tenet of the program under my supervision, as an expert in curriculum and the social/emotional needs of the gifted.

I served as Director of the program, thereby having ready access to participants throughout their tenure in the program. Using observations, multi-formatted interviews (focus groups, individual and impromptu discussions), and participation in many activities participants and I captured richness and depth of focus about perceptions, expectations and experiences associated with giftedness and their role as students.

Methodology
This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of gifted adolescents as they told about their role as students. On a cursory level, participants were asked to provide their personal stories as secondary school students; and, listen to and compare their experiences with others’. The goal was to capture evidence addressing the research questions, and allow participants to comparatively hone their work presenting a holistic story about their lived experiences.

This open engagement, however, initially prompted me to consider the likelihood of these gifted individuals, being competitive and perfectionistic\(^1\), to “one up” each other. Indeed, the possibility of participants either telling me only what they presumed I wanted to hear (whether it be “truth” or fabrication) or “one-upping” peers facilitated a broadening of the approach to strive for credibility and triangulation through the data points.

First, phenomenology provided the most appropriate initial research perspective to capture the essence of participant meaning making. The goal was to open space for participants to be accepted and acknowledged based on their experiences and personally attributed significance to events and actions. As van Manen (1990) said,

> The point of phenomenological research is to “borrow” other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience. (p. 62).

Phenomenology provided an entry into participants’ lived experience. But, did not provide contextual understanding beyond the personal interpretations of each participant.

Naturalistic case study design grounded the phenomenological data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), providing textual narratives describing the lived experiences and perceptions of each participant (Yin, 1994). I collaborated with each participant to

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\(^1\) Based on my experience working with gifted adolescents, these general characteristics of gifted learners tend to be highly prevalent in secondary level academically-identified gifted individuals.
develop the final case. The intent was to generate personal life stories participants could share and compare with one another.

As these comparative events occurred, ethnography captured interactions occurring and provided the researcher’s perspective, interpretive frame of mind, and observations while in the field. The goal was to gain an essence of understanding about cultural impact occurring in the lives of the participants (Wolcott, 1995) and keep disclosing my thoughts and interpretations to participants to provide them opportunity to clarify their responses and correct my interpretations.

Ethnography also allowed participants and the researcher to “make sense” of the data and negotiate the representation of discussions, actions and recollections. This collaborative experience provided first-hand interaction concerning the lived experiences, beliefs and tendencies participants had and I experienced and inferred (Hammersley, 1992). This purposeful co-analysis provided respectful honoring of participant words captured during the study—while not limiting context and understanding to initial verbal responses or my meaning making process alone.

Data Collection

Data were collected via observations; focus group discussion sessions (31 participants involved); individual interviews (11 participants involved); and, casual and impromptu conversation with 31 gifted adolescents. Not every participant volunteered to individual interviews, yet each collaborated to varying degrees to develop a personal case narrative. In some instances only reading the preliminary narrative and approving of it. In
others, actively editing and revising the narrative and volunteering to further interviews to better represent their meaning.

These collaborative efforts resulted in 31 distinct presentations of personal lived experiences. Each of these provided interpretations of the role as student each participant held.

**Limitations**

Limitations are viewed as starting points for additional work rather than weaknesses degrading the findings from this work. Caution should be exercised when exploring transferability of interpretations from this study to other settings.

The following provide some evidence about the messiness of conducting research in a setting limited by time. Participants were out of their natural environments, recollecting their attitudes, feelings and frustrations without access to the milieu contributing to their stories. Yet, the collaborative nature of the study provided opportunities for participants to examine the meanings of their lives in an environment supported by the self-explorations of others.

First, individuals volunteered to participate in the study. Peer pressure, although, likely played a role in the limits of interaction each person was willing to endure. Some seemed very willing to tell their story. Others reluctantly became involved after experiencing the chatter of their roommates about the project.

I feel these somewhat reticent individuals were “forced” into participation in order to connect more with their roommates and other peers. For many, this was the first residential camp they had attended. To fit in, there was pressure to adapt to settings and activities not normally experienced at home. Strong bonds and personal connections were made by participants; but not without giving of themselves to meet others on common ground.
Second, the one-week format of the Institute limited the ability to achieve a saturation point in the discussion (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This is an exhaustion of information from the participant. In essence, nothing is left to say that contributes to the developing narrative, or a frustration point is reached where conversation halts.

With such a short duration for interaction and fieldwork, “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) is definitely lacking in participant lived experience. However, the descriptions presented and narratives developed provide some candid responses connected to participant perceptions, expectations and experiences as gifted students in the process of their educations.

Third, since each participant’s recollections were the primary data sources, credibility was an issue. I was unsure if the stories told were factually based, or attempts to provide me with what participants thought I wanted to hear.

I worried, on the one hand, lack of participant commitment and involvement in collaborating meant my interpretations were far a field from lived experience. On the other hand, zealous involvement in collaboration yielded friendships that might have resulted in overstatements or biased presentation of lived experiences.

Indeed, casual conversations with groups of participants led me to feel they were engaged in “one-upping” behaviors. As stated in my field journal, “Today Shawn, Matt, Kristi and I talked a bit about Aaron’s school life. Especially Kristi thought his case was exaggerated to get a rise out of others. I wonder how prevalently this aggrandizement is occurring?” (coded entry CC1, June 26, 2002).

_Yankin’ My Chain_

When faced with conversation or other communication by participant that seemed overblown, I began asking, “Are you yankin’ my chain?” Based on facial expressions,
body posture or fidgety behavior, I was (seemingly) able to reduce one-upping tendencies.

Aaron did smile broadly when asked if he was yankin’ my chain today. We talked a few minutes about the need for accuracy so I could understand and get his story straight. I told him I wasn’t interested in putting him on a pedestal. I wanted to know about his life as a gifted student so I could understand maybe how others felt also. He nodded and seemed to get more serious. I think we broke some new ground. (coded entry, Ach-3, June 27, 2002)

This approach became my mantra each time I spoke with participants. So much so, they began to expect my question—to the point I began to be known as the “YMC-man.”

Analysis

Using an ethnographic approach, the phenomenological cases were explored for themes representing common concerns and approaches participants used to survive in the classroom. Vignettes from the data set provide participant voice in the discussion. A marriage between the data set and literature base was the goal.

My interpretations are based on the fieldwork, researcher log and discussions with participants as this article was evolving. Continuous reflection and member checking scaffold the presentation. Readers are encouraged to draw your own conclusions based on experiences before assuming transferability and alignment of the discussion to other settings.

Complexity of the Setting

Learners are active information processors, who effect events in the classroom as much as they are affected by them (Pintrich et al., 1986; Schunk & Meece, 1992). The environment and interactions taking place during class time provide learners with multiple ways of interpreting self-effectiveness and appropriate behavior.
The complexity of the milieu, however, limits the capability of scholarly efforts to holistically define just what is taking place for each person in the setting. There are no simple solutions to any situation in education.

Fraser (1986) stated classroom interactions should be documented from the perspectives of each stakeholder group when examining learning. This approach provides avenues to document the multifaceted meaning making experiences of individuals involved in the setting. Indeed, this action plan yields deep levels of information about learner needs, and may give evidence to support the need for ability grouping in schools (Davis & Rimm, 1998; Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 1991).

Yet, the perceptions and expectations students hold—especially gifted adolescents—have been sparsely examined in the literature (Gallagher & Rogge, 1966; Hansford & Hattie, 1982; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Raph, Goldberg, & Passow, 1966; Shavelson & Bolus, 1982; Shore, Cornell, Robinson & Ward, 1991; Whitmore, 1980; Wylie, 1961, 1970; Zilli, 1971). Interestingly, most of the research conducted in schools considers students as a raw material in the education process rather than viable stakeholders having varied ability levels, free will or power to choose performance level in the setting.

The following sections present themes exploring comparisons and similarities identified from the data set. They begin with a wide swath (respect and personal control) broadly examining the context, gradually narrowing in focus to a very specific and personal approach (submersion) used by individuals to intellectually survive in a classroom setting.
Classroom Climate

Classroom climate is a well-studied phenomenon in the scholarly literature (Ames & Archer, 1988; Brophy & Good, 1986; Fraser & Walberg, 1991; Pintrich, Cross, Kozma, & McKeachie, 1986; Schunk & Meece, 1992; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990). However, complex, affective interactions occurring between students, teachers and the environment affect behavior and learning for everyone in a classroom. Perceptions, expectations, and prior experiences contribute to, and often drive performance.

Gifted students amplify these interactive effects. Their emotional awareness and developmental levels are often more acute and advanced than age peers (Piechowski, 1991), leading to performance or achievement that may or may not approach expectations based on measures of ability (Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982). In some cases, concerns beyond the immediacies of classroom defined expectations are deemed more important than a score or grade—for example, illness of a relative, loss of a pet, or even seasonal change of clothing and therefore “loss” of a favorite sweater until next fall.

In other instances, mastery of content may be quickly achieved leading to purposeful refusal to attend to repetitive homework (and therefore loss of homework points). Or, realization a teacher is under- or unprepared to address questions requiring depth of content knowledge or critical thinking leading to loss of respect and subsequent development of behavior problems (either real or perceived). Chris’ comments provide an intriguing explanation:

When it’s busy work, I don’t do it. I have more critical ventures to consume my time. So much of school, though, is layers of business without educational value. Purposeless points accumulated to satisfy a high grade; to me this makes little sense. I score high enough to get A’s. I don’t feel the need to get ALL the points! (Chris, personal communication, 2002)

Students experience different learning environments from their peers in a given classroom (Sadker & Sadker, 1985; Tobin, 1987; Tobin & Gallagher, 1987; Tobin & Malone,
This complex network of individual realities determines learner self-concept and perceptions of appropriate self-existence and belonging (Anderson, 1982; Anderson & Walberg, 1974; Fraser, 1981a, 1981b; Fraser & Walberg, 1981; Marshall & Weinstein, 1984). In many instances, the inability of students to align themselves with others is critical to academic and social failure.

The awareness of difference is acute in gifted individuals due to highly developed perceptual abilities and emotional intensities (Piechowski, 1996; Schultz & Delisle, 2002; Webb et al., 1982). Most gifted individuals are aware early in life they differ from other agemates. This can be traumatic for gifted youngsters unable to regulate their intellectual ability to fit in with that of age peers, or the expected performance levels of the classroom. Amanda discussed this pressure, “I think everyone would agree that summer programs are challenging but not stressful. The only thing riding on your performance is personal satisfaction” (Amanda, personal communication, 2002).

Spiraling In

Broad analysis and exhaustive classification of the data did not lead to much insight. Themes became evident, but provided few ways to holistically interpret meaning. To close in on understanding, I began exploring the data for cause-effect relationships (in a cursory way). I began to notice the following sequence of events taking place throughout discussions, interviews and member checking of the data set:

1. Participant acknowledgement of a problematic experience (real or perceived),
2. Ways they could address the problematic experience,
3. Practices commonly used to cope with the situation.

This sequence was used to define a flow of information narrowing in on the meaning making processes and personal experiences participants had in classrooms.
figure 2). The stories became much more personal, yet showed consistencies across individual cases. Respect and personal control broadly defined problematic experiences for all participants. Input and choice were seen as ways to address the situation. But, submersion tended to be a common way to cope with the problem while hoping for input and choice to be offered.

*Respect and Personal Control.*

*Every experience is a moving force.*

(*Dewey, 1938, p. 38*)

Participants perceived a lack of personal control for learning. They felt the educational system was restrictive and punitive, forcing them to take part in a less than adequate learning context. Stacey said:

> We are only in class for a semester or year. Then we move on to a new set of challenges—mostly trying to figure out what the new teachers are looking for. This has little to do with learning content or specific things; much more to do with communication and playing by the rules. Where is the balance? Where is the individualness so needed to give me opportunity to shine? (Stacey, personal communication, 2002)

Participants spoke eloquently of their want, and need, to change the curriculum and environment of the classroom, but lacked immediate remedies. This led to frustration, ultimately playing out in various forms of noncompliant behavior. Dante provides an example of covert activity and the effect on his classroom performance:

> An authoritarian as a teacher sets me into underground mode. I follow my interests while sitting quietly and pretending to follow along. I only do what is necessary to get by, never anything extra unless I need to raise my overall grade. Then, it’s back to minimum effort a maximum of the time. (Dante, personal communication, 2002)

Currently, much theoretical interest is placed on development of higher order thinking skills, critical thinking, problem solving and life-long learning. However, focus
of classroom teaching remains fundamentally the same—what strategies can be used to mold students to fit educational outcomes based on accountability requirements?

Few opportunities exist for student enrichment and development of higher ability levels. Many of these occur outside the regular curriculum, adding more pressure on students when they become actively engaged and then have to return to the regular education setting.

Every time I take one of these extended classes over the summer, I wonder how much pain I will have to endure when I return to school in the fall. It’s back to the boring, uninteresting dreck I knew three or more years ago. There is no chance for me to build on my summer work without being really noticed for being ahead, or a deep thinker. The danger in that is everyone then expects more from me. I don’t want more expectations, more attention, more work to do! I want a chance to keep moving at my pace ahead. Doing interesting work instead of the stuff I already know. (Harry, personal communication, 2002)

Inconsistencies in the mission of schools (i.e., providing learning opportunities for all students) caused many participants to wonder why there was even talk about learning. Aaron, for example, felt discouraged about his inability to gain respect for his (and other’s) needs:

I wish the focus of school was more on what kids need to know, rather than what teachers think we have to have to pass tests. I know about authentic assessment, but how can you be authentic when only allowing tests to dictate what is and isn’t covered in class? (Aaron, personal communication, 2002)

From the perspective of participants, schools were dysfunctional and disrespectful—not just to students, but to everyone within the system.

The teachers are always complaining about proficiency tests and the pressure put on them to get kids to score high. We see the disrespect they get on TV, in the paper, from the community. How can they teach, and we learn, when we constantly stop, compare and test? In reality, the test have little to do with what we are attempting to learn anyhow. It’s like a round of jeopardy—but the focus isn’t on how much you know. It’s all about what you don’t know. (Alice, personal communication, 2002)
As for personal control, Tamika shared her insights within the discussion about pressure to perform:

Many times in school, it’s the teacher’s personality that determines my performance. In a class where there is acceptance of difference and realization that questions far outweigh solutions, I get revved up. Where it’s “my way or the highway,” I look for the first off-ramp and let my mind wander to more interesting activities even while I look like I’m paying attention. (Tamika, personal communication, 2002)

An implied goal for school is to help students learn. This means starting where students are and moving forward from there—for each of them. Rarely, however, did this seem to occur in participants’ experience. Much of the focus was on competition, with a strict view of raising the bottom ability levels rather than stretching everyone. Again, Amanda shares:

I’m always looking forward to opportunities in the summer to be accepted and move drastically forward in my learning. I love challenge, but not competition! That’s why I come to summer programs. We all get a chance to shine without having to compete for grades, or constantly compare our work with others. (Amanda, personal communication, 2002)

Schools and stakeholders located within them are compelled to react to outside influences and perceptions about effective teaching and learning. Accountability seems to have a stranglehold on the perceptions, expectations and experiences students have about school.

Participants posited teachers focused on minimum performance as maximum output. They struggled with this realization, feeling jilted; but could rationalize the situation.

They [teachers] know it, but they don’t get it. We all have different abilities, but get no respect or way to control the setting to grow. If you’re scoring well on proficiency, you’re fine; regardless of your grades. I think teachers get this mindset laid on them, too. If the kids score high proficient, the pressure’s off. If they don’t, no more interesting work—just
pumping through sample after sample test until everyone passes. (Joe, personal communication, 2002)

Respect and personal control broadly encircled the data points. Tightening in on understanding, though, meant a narrowing of focus. Input and choice became ways participants saw they could have some effect on education.

*Input and Choice.*

According to participants, teachers need to involve students more in the curriculum development and implementation phases of the education process. Kristi, for example, stated:

I just want to have some input, some choice in what I have to do. I have a couple teachers who respect this; but, I have three others who see me as a problem because I want alternatives. I have trouble with these people. I tend to work at a minimal level to make do rather than exert myself even though I know I should. (Kristi, personal communication, 2002)

It seems engagement for Kristi was limited by her inability to adapt the education setting to meet her interests and needs. The setting was not inviting enough for Kristi to feel welcomed, or received by the teacher (Noddings, 1992).

Purkey and Novak (1996) discuss this welcoming and receiving relationship as a key factor to developing an invitational classroom. This setting requires letting go of the myth teachers control the classroom environment—and should not smile until Thanksgiving.

Yet, preconceived notions about expected performance levels seemed to follow (and often proceed!) gifted students from one course or year to the next. As interests or abilities began to blossom, changes in subject-based performance were noted:

I love the detail of mathematics. Solutions and proofs are elegant to me. Literature and composition seem much too loose to me. I prefer to spend my time working in math. And, I guess, consciously choose to do higher quality work there. (Samantha, personal communication, 2002)
But, these performances often do not remain static.

This week, it’s the intricacies of a trial lawyer’s role. Next week it might be poetry. In school, it’s like this too. I get hyped in science for a while, then literature, then Latin. But never just one thing for any extended period of time. I want to keep moving on, experiencing as much as I can before I have to decide a career. I can make this choice even though I get grief from limited perspective people—teachers mostly—only looking at my achievement, or underachievement in their particular class. (Bridget, personal communication, 2002)

For others, input meant sharing an insight. Tom described a “sense of loss” when teachers did not share his “excited realization connections existed across content boundaries” (Tom, personal communication, 2002).

Ward (1961) described the core goal of education to be “intellectualization of experience, the ideational elaboration by the individual of man’s cumulative insights into nature, such that continuing perceptions occur within an increasingly comprehensive and meaningful context” (p. 64). Tom’s above statement infers a connection with Ward’s educational goal; yet, Tom’s insightfulness was not realized by teachers as anything exceptional. Tom was left “discouraged and wondering if my thoughts were too original, or even if anyone thought this way at all.” It seemed a corrupt lesson was being learned—adherence to expectations of performance mattered; insightfulness, excitement and input were not relevant. Tom was learning his lesson:

From time to time, I choose projects to focus my energies on that allow me to make connections between classes. When this happens, I seem to get better scores in each connected class. At the same time, my scores drop in unconnected classes. And, I don’t even share my connections. Keeping input to myself avoids loss. I feel better this way, and know I’ll find more and more connections. (Tom, personal communication, 2002)

Teachers receiving participant input and respecting requests for choice in the curriculum were seen by participants as viable strategies promising respect and personal
control. But, few participants experienced educational settings where their input or requests for choice were met. Coping strategies became important tools for surviving in the classroom.

*Submersion.*

Submersion is the process of covering over, suppressing, or hiding (McKechnie, 1983). This operative term described tendencies discussed by many participants. For example, Elizabeth talked about an experience teaching her to submerge:

> I worked hard on an interesting project in school. I did well, but all of a sudden, the game changed. Teachers began expecting more and more from me. My comfortable life began to fade away with pressure replacing my happiness. I was glad I was moving to high school. There, I could start again, and trust me, I won’t show what I can do if I am interested again! (Elizabeth, personal communication, 2002)

Submersion seems to be very prevalent in school according to participants. It was talked about as a coping strategy to fend off boredom and “underchallenge.”

Grades and effort are disconnected to me. I mean, it’s relatively easy to keep all A’s; but, many I earn without having to input effort. When it’s a subject or topic I like, I ratchet up my level of focus but it rarely lasts for long. I haven’t found a niche that suits me yet. I’m told I can do anything I put my mind to, but it’s hard to pick when everything seems just okay. (Julie, personal communication, 2002)

Or, as a method of self-preservation—to keep from having extra work piled on, or high expectations attached.

> I’ve also hidden my abilities to not get more work. But, having been identified as gifted, the expectations are there. Everyone thinks I always will have the answer, and jeers me when I get something wrong. Hey, I am wrong most of the time! It doesn’t bother me, except when everyone else becomes mean. Why is the world so competitive? I really hate being pushed to compete against others. So, I mean, I kind of sink myself into the system and keep my grades at a moderate level. (April, personal communication, 2002)
Participants were very savvy at hiding themselves in the milieu of the school day. Their needs were not brought to teachers’ attention due to having personal experience or witnessing penalties when they or others reacted overtly to limitations in school experiences.

I did shoot off my mouth once. It was a lesson we had done a few weeks earlier in another class. And before that, the year before—twice. I had enough. I raised my hand, was called on, and told the teacher that we all knew the outcome since this same lesson was now being repeated for the second time that year, and the fourth time in the past two years. She scowled, screamed “how dare you tell me about teaching”, and yanked me from my seat by the arm. I didn’t hear anything else at that moment. I only saw the petrified look on my classmates. Quickly, I grabbed my stuff and ran out the door. I wandered down to the office, where the assistant principal was waiting for me. I got three days of out of school suspension. Never again, I vowed. I would never again say anything in class. I would put in my time, like my parents said, and get on with my life. (Amy, personal communication, 2002)

Many participants stated it was better for them to exist in the classroom without drawing attention to their frustration. Amy’s above quote best represented the hurt and anger many other participants talked about. All, it seemed had witnessed unjust outcomes for their choice to let adults in the classroom know about previous learning experiences.

Submersion was safety and a sense of personal esteem. This provided opportunity to engage in more personally satisfying mental activities, while the class plodded along at a stagnant pace.

I work the *Times* crossword puzzle during notes, or seatwork. Sometimes, I can only think through the answers or write music scores in my mind’s eye. I hear the Charlie Brown teacher’s voice in the real classroom and drift off to more interesting thoughts or visions of what I’ll be doing when class is over. It’s not a boring situation; it’s completely fruitless! I get pressure from friends if I ask questions (they’re too hard for others to comprehend), or get the teacher excited causing more work for us all. I just drift away into quiet oblivion. (Becky, personal communication, 2002)
These individuals coped with the daily malady of underchallenge by covertly challenging themselves. They submerged in the educational setting, displaying the façade of attentiveness and conformity.

Delisle (1992) introduces the term “nonproducer” as an alternative to underachiever. He explores the possibility that many individuals are mislabeled based on strict examination of only performance (typically by looking exclusively at grades) rather than considering the classroom climate, demeanor of the setting, and level of interest in the curriculum.

Nonproducers may be too prescriptive of a term, though. Perhaps selective producers or adult behaviors fit the performance tendencies more appropriately. For example, it is rare that a student would nonproduce in all subjects or classes. The choice to perform (with gusto!) may be limited to one subject, or even one teacher’s classroom. In this case, the learner is selectively choosing where and when to perform.

There are times when any one of us is not focusing 100% on what is going on. This, I think, is what life is all about. You need to be able to put your attention where it is most needed, regardless of what is going on around you. As I see it, life is the most important aspect of the day. School subjects break life up into sequenced pieces that may or may not make any difference at any particular time. My job is to take the pieces and try to put them together in a meaningful way. At times, I do this capably. At other times, I struggle to make sense of who I am in comparison with what I am being taught. There are times when I can muddle through the day, keep a smile on my face, and not be found out for struggling to understand. On these days, I don’t underachieve, I just think. (Perry, personal communication, 2002)

In a similar vein, adult behaviors tend to follow the script of nonproducer tendencies (see Figure 3). How often do you perform at maximum capability during the day? It is more likely you work toward maximum efficiency, which translates to putting effort into interesting or engaging projects while “coasting” through other requirements.
Reflections

Participants shared the frustration many adults experience—lack of respect and personal control in their lives. They described the need for input and choice in the school setting, where they had some say in the instructional decisions experienced. However, these solutions seemed “pie in the sky” for most. Rather than having opportunities to gain input, choice, respect and personal control, participants described coping behaviors—most notably their ability to submerge into the system, not drawing attention to their abilities or frustrations.

I suspect many gifted and talented adolescents are submersed in schools. This operative tendency seems to ring true with every gifted and talented adolescent I interview (Schultz, 2002a; 2002b; 2001; 1999). Indeed, I believe all individuals living in a less than desirable situation use this coping mechanism. Abilities, interests and passions are hidden intentionally; leading to lack of challenge and personally fulfilling opportunities to learn and achieve.

If this contention is valid, I wonder if the focus on minimum competency and proficiency is having heinous effects on society’s advance. How many artists, inventors, scientists and philosophers are submersed—unwilling and unable to test their mettle? Ligon (1948) wondered about this possibility in A Greater Generation. In a little over fifty years, how different are circumstances today?

Participants were forthright in their discussion of classroom events and personal actions. They intended to provide information for teachers and other students facing similar conditions and voluntarily member-checked transcripts, interpretations and presentation of actions and events a minimum of three times to help validate narratives. Through this process I was able to clarify representations and explanations of participant
life experiences. My intent was to present the lives of students using their own words; clarifying actions and events for readers to gain an essence of what it means to be a gifted adolescent.

Themes derived from participant narratives respect the perceptions, expectations and experiences individuals used to guide behavior both in and out of classrooms. These matched (in essence and often vocabulary) findings from earlier research conducted during the school year with underachieving gifted individuals (Schultz, 1999). Perhaps this is an example of unwitting bias by the researcher—in effect finding exactly what I set out to find. Or, the similarities may be indicative of the transferability and transitive nature of gifted adolescent needs in classrooms. Curiosity leads me to believe something is going on that needs additional focused attention within the research community.

Participants accepted that conforming to classroom and school edicts, lack of connection to life beyond the school walls, and minimal opportunities to take part in engaging activities encumbered their school lives. Yet, all looked promisingly toward the future as a place where passions, interests and learning needs will be met.

A sense of passionate hopefulness abounds in these participants. They look to the future with awe—wondering just how they fit and might contribute to a better world. They are also realists.

Participants know school is not often an accurate or even meaningful representation of life. Matt’s poignant statement serves as evidence, “I do what I want, make choices, and sometimes don’t commit effort if the activity or project isn’t in my area of interest. Don’t adults do this?” (Matt, personal communication, 2002).
I have to answer, “Yes” with a smile. Matt has achieved a state of personal development allowing him to independently reason and take ownership for his opportunities. Isn’t this a hope for all gifted and talented children?
References


Fraser, B.J. (1986). *Classroom environment*. Dover, NH: Croom Helm.


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