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Underachievement of Creatively Gifted High School Students

Abstract

Underachievement is a pervasive problem for gifted students, and creatively gifted students may be at greater risk for underachievement due to personality traits, lack of challenge in strength areas, a mismatch between school environment and student needs, low status associated with creative achievements and behaviors in the school system, and other factors. This study focused on six creatively gifted, underachieving high school students from an urban-cluster area in the western United States. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to gather data in the form of interviews with underachieving, creatively gifted students, their parents, and teachers; observation of classrooms; and creative artifacts to uncover the essence of the experience of underachievement for these stakeholders. These data groups were then compared to each other and existing literature to help generate recommendations for changes in school programming and practice for helping this student population.

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Underachievement of Creatively Gifted High School Students

A Doctoral Research Project

Presented to

the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Jennie M. Mizrahi

February 2018

Advisor: Norma Hafenstein, PhD

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ABSTRACT

Underachievement is a pervasive problem for gifted students, and creatively gifted students may be at greater risk for underachievement due to personality traits, lack of challenge in strength areas, a mismatch between school environment and student needs, low status associated with creative achievements and behaviors in the school system, and other factors. This study focused on six creatively gifted, underachieving high school students from an urban-cluster area in the western United States. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to gather data in the form of interviews with underachieving, creatively gifted students, their parents, and teachers; observation of classrooms; and creative artifacts to uncover the essence of the experience of underachievement for these stakeholders. These data groups were then compared to each other and existing literature to help generate recommendations for changes in school programming and practice for helping this student population.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

I have been a high school art teacher for fifteen years. It is something I never thought I would be. In my early high school years, I thought I would be a physicist. I didn't sign up for any art classes—classes that had been my favorite up to that point—because I decided that it was time I got serious, and art was not something that people really did, not for a living. All the adults in my life knew that I was smart and encouraged me to aim high. I hung out with hard working, high achieving students who were in all the same honors classes as I was. But, I didn't feel that close to any of them. I felt guilty that some things they worked hard for came to me quite easily. I put extra effort into the assignments that interested me and coasted on the rest, seeing little to no difference in my grades either way. Or I would drastically procrastinate until little time was left, then push hard to get things in on time. The teachers didn't seem to notice I did not have the same study skills as my peers, just that the work I produced was of high (enough) quality.

Then I hit AP Biology. For the first time in my life, I encountered something that was almost incomprehensible to me. True, I had had a late and slow start to reading in elementary school, but I had been tested for learning disabilities, and these tests showed I was not in the disabled range. I had never been able to spell, and constantly reversed letter order within words while writing, but computer programs with spell check had

arrived on the scene, and all those verbal problems had resolved in sixth grade. My math grades did begin to plummet in seventh grade after a change in school districts and a low placement score led me to be put in a class that was too easy. But my grades recovered when (after my persistent parents intervened) I was placed in a more advanced class. This was different. This Biology class felt less like science and more like a combination of a history class (which I disliked) and a foreign language class (which always made me want to walk out early). I simply couldn't make it through the reading, and if I did, none of it stayed in my head. My grade was still fine (I didn't know how), but I knew that I was drowning. Sometime soon, someone would find out that I was a fraud in Biology, and then, that I was a fraud everywhere else. I became deeply depressed as my sense of who I was began to collapse.

I now know that the problems I was having are not unique. They are, in fact, fairly typical for gifted students in danger of underachievement (Rimm, 2003). Due to lack of challenge at an early age, I had never developed good study skills, and my sense of who I was began to rest on the fact that I was able to accomplish as much as my peers, with less effort, one of the dangers of what Dweck (2000) calls a fixed mindset. This led to a feeling that I had been an imposter in all my achievements, I was not as smart as everyone thought I was, and I was just waiting to be found out. Behaviors like task avoidance, procrastination, and negative perfectionism are all avoidance behaviors I engaged in to hide my own skill deficits, as many underachievers do (Rimm, 2003). I did not feel in control of my life but engaged in activities that I thought were expected of me rather than those I wanted to do. This low sense of personal control is also common

amongst underachievers (Rimm, 2003). Finally, my gifts covered an existing learning disability. Twice exceptional students (who are gifted and have learning difficulties) are at greater risk of underachievement than other gifted students because either the gifts hide the disability, or the disability hides the gifts, making it harder for educators to provide proper instruction and for students and families to understand what is going on (Rimm, 2003).

I was lucky. My parents saw my struggle and intervened. They, along with a fantastic school counselor, worked to find out what was happening. I discovered, to my surprise, that my parents would support my decisions even if I didn't want to go to college. They gave me the space to articulate what was wrong, and what I felt was missing in my life: I no longer had a creative outlet, and the expectations that I assumed others had for me were not in line with my own needs and who I was. I returned to art and dropped the AP Biology class. Through counseling, I began to reconcile the fact that I was both gifted and learning disabled in language, as well as having gifts in other areas—including creativity.

At the same time, I changed friend groups. I grew distant from the high-achieving group I had spent time with since moving to that school district and began to spend more time with peers in the music and theater departments. This change led me to a core of friends who were as smart as I was, but who were also extremely creative. However, they did not seem to care if they were on the approved path to success. They were more likely to take risks both with their ideas and general behavior, were somewhat disruptive in class when it suited them and invisible at other times. Each followed his or her own

drummer, did the assignments they enjoyed, re-interpreted or simply neglected the rest. For many of them this meant that their grades were low and their future prospects—on paper, at least—were somewhat grim. Many of them viewed school as the enemy. I knew that my choice to associate with this group puzzled some of my teachers, but I also knew that I had found the people with whom I had the most in common. They had the creativity that my old friends had lacked. Unfortunately for them, somehow this meant that they were not traditionally successful in school.

When I became a teacher, I began to see students in my classes who reminded me of my high school friends. They were (to me) clearly intelligent and highly creative, but they didn't seem to thrive in public high school. They were invested in their own interests. (One student I particularly remember was in remedial classes across the board, but sat in my room reading Steven Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* during lunch, talking to me about physics.) Despite sometimes intense pressure from teachers and parents, these students didn't work for grades. If something was not a priority for them, they simply didn't engage. Others seemed to lack the ability to get organized or refused to turn assignments in if they weren't perfect. Some were viewed by many teachers to be disruptive. Many dropped out of school. One committed suicide the year after his graduation. Seeing these students, who seemed so full of potential, and witnessing their disconnect with their own education, made me wonder if it was not the students failing at school, but the school failing these students. I saw in them the road I had not taken.

I have experienced underachievement in various forms: in my own life, in the lives of my friends, and in the lives of my students. I have seen that creatively gifted

students, in particular, may struggle with the expectations and requirements (actual or perceived) of school. I have also experienced the great benefits when education has met my interests and needs. I would like to see a happier outcome for these students, who are, at their core, my people.

Statement of Problem

Historically, the public school system in the United States has had two seemingly contradictory roles: societal stabilizer, perpetuating common norms, ideals, and culture (Popkewitz, 2011); and an agent for change, responding to and creating innovation in the economy and society (Rauscher, 2015; Baker, 2009). As secondary education has become more common (increasing at a rate of 3.66% per capita, per year since 1970), employers have placed increasing value on analytic and synthetic thinking skills (Baker, 2009). The call for “21st century skills” now includes problem solving, problem finding, and creativity to prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist (Metz, 2011). These skills are, for the most part, goals that propel the school’s role as an agent of change.

Despite the prevalence of the idea of 21st century skills in schools, systematic support and accountability with regards to these skills is not mandated by law across curricula but handled piecemeal (Metz, 2011; Noddings, 2013). At the same time a push toward standardization occurred, with No Child Left Behind, Common Core, and various teacher evaluation systems written into law at federal and state levels (Beisser, 2008). These programs may have the potential to perpetuate the school role of societal stabilizer, inherently resistant to change. With so much financial and institutional pressure toward

conformity, programs that encourage creativity and higher-level thinking are endangered as teachers feel compelled to “teach to the test” (Tutt, 2014).

Creativity is an agent through which ideas and accepted norms in knowledge, enquiry, and practice change (Sternberg, 2001). Out of all the 21st century skills, therefore, creativity is the skill most likely to come into conflict with the public school’s traditional role as societal stabilizer (Craft, 2003). This conflict has the potential to make school a hostile place for creatively gifted students (Zhao, 2011). In my role as a high school art teacher, I have witnessed underachievement among these young adults in particular.

Creative individuals display certain traits such as divergent thinking, playfulness, risk-taking, heightened aesthetic awareness, extreme focus on interest areas (sometimes to the exclusion of other subjects), and the ability to see connections across content areas (Davis, Rimm, & Siegle, 2011; Nickerson, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). While some of these characteristics are compatible with school environments, others can create problems when students challenge existing authority or display humor in inappropriate ways, thus garnering negative attention as trouble makers (Yeung, Chow, & Chow, 2005). Without flexible teachers and systems in place to understand, protect, and nurture creativity and creative students, the weight of conformity and pressures of convergent thinking (including teaching to the test) combined with failure to identify and value creative gifts, which leads to lack of challenge, fixed mindset, and undervaluation of work, can have negative effects on these students, cause them to lose motivation for

schooling, and lead to disengagement, underachievement, and failure to complete high school (Dweck, 2000; Hansen, & Toso, 2007; Kim, 2008; Rimm, 2003).

Students of great ability can fall through the cracks and fail to reach their full potential (Siegle, 2013). This phenomenon of underachievement, often measured by looking at discrepancies between standardized achievement and/or IQ tests and school grades, is a multi-faceted and complex problem, with many different manifestations and contributing factors (Siegle, 2013; Rimm, 2003; Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). These manifestations include low academic self-perceptions, low self-efficacy, low goal valuation, low self-motivation, external attributions, negative attitude toward school and teachers, low metacognitive skills, and maladaptive perfectionism (Siegle, 2013).

Contributing factors include anti-intellectual school atmosphere, anti-gifted atmosphere, rigid classroom environment, teachers who don't see the quality of the work they are given, unidentified learning disabilities, lack of rigor/depth early on leading to a fixed mindset, high-risk home factors, low self-esteem, low control over life, perfectionism, and expectation of low grades (Rimm, 2003). Some of these factors are outside of the school's influence. However, school curriculum, pedagogy, and environment can affect some contributing factors and manifestations of underachievement and can be affected by educators (Siegle, 2013; Rimm, 2003; Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). If we are to foster creativity, schools must become welcoming to creativity, creative individuals, and creative processes. This acceptance requires balancing the change and stabilization roles of the school, teacher, and classroom, so that stabilization influences do not perpetuate environments hostile to creativity. Before any interventions to help improve education for

underachieving creatively gifted high school students are possible, the phenomenon itself in this setting must be better understood.

Purpose of the Study

This study will help us better understand factors that contribute to the underachievement of creatively gifted students, so educators can make specific recommendations for ameliorating this problem. To accomplish this, I will examine the interaction between the overall school environment and individual experiences of students, teachers, and parents, in an attempt to identify contributing factors to the problem of underachievement in creatively gifted students, to recommend intervention, and to highlight practices that are working. It is, as yet, unclear which historical, institutional, and site-specific contributing factors are present and to what degree, so implementing interventions over the course of this study would be inappropriate. Instead, I hope to uncover the experience itself and, through this keen-sighted exploration, find a path forward and make informed recommendations for changes to (and maintenance of) existing practices. I hope to help the study site better understand the problem of underachievement in creatively gifted students, so that practical interventions can be put in place to help these students re-engage in school and reach their potential.

Research Questions

1. How do creatively gifted high school students experience underachievement?
 - a. How do teachers experience the underachievement of creatively gifted students?
 - b. How do parents experience the underachievement of creatively gifted students?
 - c. How do the experiences of this phenomenon compare amongst students, teachers, and parents?

Definition of Terms

To better understand the phenomenon of the underachievement of creatively gifted high school students, it is helpful to understand some of the terms that will be used.

Underachievement. Underachievement is often described as a difference between a gifted student's potential and actual achievement (Siegle, 2013). This definition can be problematic, as some researchers (Dweck, 2000) find that potential is impossible to measure. Potential in creativity may be doubly so, as there are few quantitative tests of creativity (Kim, 2006), and the connection between early creativity and later creative accomplishment is tentative at best (Feldman & Benjamin, 2006). Finally, creativity has not been traditionally used as a criterion for gifted identification at all (Clark & Zimmerman, 1983), so finding these students in the first place may be a challenge. For this reason, underachievement will be defined for the purposes in this study as a perceived persistent discrepancy between ability and achievement by teachers, students, and parents.

School environment. School environment is composed of many factors: the historical influences on schools (Baker, 2009; Craft, 2003; Noddings, 2013), laws and policies on the federal, state, and local levels (Noddings, 2013), curriculum (Purcell & Eckert, 2006), teacher attitudes (Seigel & Kaemerer, 1978), and even physical space (van Manen, 1990).

Gifted. Gifted students in the state of Colorado (where the study will take place) are defined as follows:

Gifted children means those persons between the ages of five and twenty-one whose abilities, talents, and potential for accomplishment are so exceptional or developmentally advanced that they require special provisions to meet their educational programming needs. Gifted and talented children are hereafter referred to as gifted students. Children under five who are gifted may also be provided with early childhood special educational services. Gifted students include gifted students with disabilities (i.e., twice-exceptional) and students with exceptional abilities or potential from all socio-economic and ethnic, cultural populations. Gifted students are capable of high performance, exceptional production, or exceptional learning behavior by virtue of any or a combination of these areas of giftedness:

- General or specific intellectual ability
- Specific academic aptitude
- Creative or productive thinking
- Leadership abilities
- Visual arts, performing arts, musical or psychomotor abilities (NAGC, 2013)

Therefore, a student can be gifted even if his/her gifts are unidentified, and/or not already included in programming. It is the ability and needs of the student that define giftedness, not the identification of it. This fact is important as underachievement may be caused or compounded by a mismatch of programming to student needs, and by a failure of teachers or schools to recognize the quality of the work being produced (Hansen & Toso, 2007; Rimm, 2003). The specification of “creative or productive thinking” is designated as an area of giftedness and as a separate area from the arts.

Creativity. Creativity consists of ideas that are original and appropriate/useful (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013; Sternberg, 2012). The questions then become: Original to what degree and in what context? And, who decides what is appropriate/useful? The first question is partially answered by Kaufman and Beghetto (2012) in their Levels of Creativity model. They break creativity into four levels: mini-c (original to the individual), little-c (original within a local context like a classroom),

Pro-c (original on a professional level), and Big-C (original across time, changing their field knowledge in a profound and lasting way). Most students accomplish mini-c levels of creativity on a regular basis as part of the learning process. High school students may not have enough exposure to the content and skills of their field to accomplish Pro-c originality (though a few do). Underachievement can affect students' abilities to access and use knowledge and skills (Rimm, 2003). Therefore, this study will focus on creativity at the high end of the little-c category, ideas that are likely to appear original within a local context, and will define creativity the generation of ideas that are original and appropriate or useful.

The question of who decides what is appropriate or useful becomes more problematic. Creativity is a force for innovation—in other words, for change. Because of this, creativity can be perceived as a threat (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013). If a person feels threatened by a new idea, s/he may not see it as appropriate. Since failure to see the value of an idea by those in positions of authority is a contributing factor to underachievement (Rimm, 2003), it is vital that the researcher not dismiss original ideas based on the assessments of those who may be threatened by these ideas. For the purposes of this study, I will rely on the creator (usually the student) to determine what is appropriate or useful. This is particularly appropriate considering the level of creativity being considered. I also hope that this will help neutralize any power issues that might otherwise work to suppress student creativity in the school context.

Significance of the Study

Businesses increasingly tout the importance of innovation (Amabile, Conti, Coon,

Lazenby, & Herron, 1996), and progress in western society rests on creative ideas (Sternberg, 2001). Historically, the United States has relied on the inventiveness of its citizens to compete on the international level, hence, the push for support of creativity in 1950 after Gilford's Presidential Address to the American Psychology Association (Feldman & Benjamin, 2006). However, if creativity is not visibly valued in school, students with creative gifts may not get the full benefit of their education as they disengage in school (Kim, 2008; Yeung, Chow, & Chow, 2005). This disengagement could have a negative impact on the economics and world standing of the country (Feldman & Benjamin, 2006; Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010).

Far greater, perhaps, is the personal impact of underachievement in creatively gifted students. As employers increasingly rely on high levels of educational attainment for high- and even middle-income jobs (Baker, 2006), students who underachieve and drop out of high school may lose significant income over the course of their lifetimes and fail to experience the amount of fulfillment and joy that might otherwise be possible (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). This failure is the real tragedy of underachievement for this population.

Limitations

It is beyond the scope of this study to collect the perceptions of all stakeholders, so the sample will greatly influence the results. The operationalization of "creatively gifted" in the absence of a reliable process for universally identifying this area of giftedness means perceptions of various stakeholders will influence the choice of study participants, and so bias may result.

Since recruitment of student and parent participants involved a parent volunteering process, the sample may be skewed toward active parenting styles and away from passive parenting styles. All participants are middle class and present as white, so the sample is monolithic. Therefore, this study does not address issues of minority or low socio-economic status, which have been shown in the literature to affect achievement (e.g. Rimm, 2003; Seigle, 2013).

As a researcher, I am not unbiased on this subject. I have a teacher's emotional investment in the creative underachievers who have been in my care (past and present). In addition, my own experiences with this phenomenon, and those of my husband, have given me a strong position and some preconceived expectations of findings as I enter the process of research. While I will attempt to keep an open mind throughout the study, my previous experiences will inevitably color what I notice and how I value my own observations. I will attempt to arrive at the true lived experiences of my participants through co-creation techniques, outlined in the methods section, that invite participants to read and have input on the final written findings throughout the process and through exploration of existing literature to help illuminate my data.

Summary

The underachievement of students in high school has both social and economic significance (Feldman & Benjamin, 2006; Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010, Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Creatively gifted students may be at higher risk for underachievement, and the nature of interventions for this problem may be different than those needed for underachievement in other groups (Kim, 2008). This study will explore

the experiences of underachievement of creatively gifted high school students, as well as their parents and teachers, with the goal of better understanding the phenomenon so that appropriate strategies can be implemented to help this population.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand how creativity and underachievement interact in a secondary public school setting, educators require some understanding of the definitions and models of both underachievement and creativity, and the factors affecting these concepts, as well as those that shape the school setting. I will explore underachievement first, how it is variously defined and what factors are considered to contribute to it. Then I will discuss aspects of the development of school environment, including the history of schooling, laws that affect school environment, and specific curricular and classroom factors. I will present an overview of theories of creativity, including ways of studying creativity and the conclusions that can be drawn about the characteristics of creative people, their cognitive processes, and their interaction with their environment. Finally, I will present possible ways that creativity, school environment, and underachievement may be linked, along with the deficits in the literature on this topic.

Underachievement

Underachievement has been widely studied in gifted education (e.g., Deslisle & Galbraith, 2002; McCoach & Siegle, 2008; Reis & McCoach, 2002a, 2002b; Rimm, 2003; Siegle, 2013). Even though the definition of underachievement is under dispute, much of the research (Deslisle & Galbraith, 2002; Rimm, 2003; Siegle, 2013) concludes that this is a multifaceted problem for gifted students (and other stakeholders in their

lives), with similar underlying factors between models, and that it is vital to see each student as an individual in a complex system so as to give individualized help to address his/her needs.

Defining underachievement. Several ways are available to define underachievement. One that is often used is the discrepancy model. Siegle (2013) puts it this way, “Gifted underachievers are those who fail to further develop the advanced skills they initially demonstrated or those whose untapped potential failed to materialize” (p. 9). He recommends using IQ or achievement scores compared with grades (even though grades are not standardized across teachers and schools) to identify and/or measure underachievement, because grades show what students are producing in the classroom, which reflects motivational issues and so is tied to underachievement, while IQ and achievement scores measure only ability. Like Siegle, Rimm uses a discrepancy definition, seeing underachievers as gifted students who do not perform to their tested abilities over an extended period (Rimm, 2003, p. 424). Delisle and Galbraith (2002) define underachievement as two separate phenomena that must be identified and treated differently, even if they seem similar on the surface. Rather than just underachievement, they divide this concept into two types: underachievement and nonproduction or “selective consumerism” (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002, p. 167). By this definition, underachievers want to achieve but lack the tools, while selective consumers actively choose not to achieve for various reasons.

These definitions have the advantage of avoiding the word “potential,” which, according to Dweck (2000), cannot really be assessed (p. 60). What is assessed is

performance on a particular task at a particular time (Dweck, 2000). Although many psychometric tests (some of which will be discussed later) attempt to predict future performance and as such may be seen by some as predictors of potential, the links between the predictive power of creativity tests and future creative performance is tenuous, even with tests that show good test-retest reliability (Kim, 2006; Seigle & Kaemmerer, 1978). This is important when taking into consideration difficulties in identifying the strengths of students whose latent abilities have never been given exposure to appropriate programming that would help these abilities develop (Davis, 2003; Purcell & Eckert, 2006; Roberts, 2008; Tomlinson et al. 2003).

Contributing factors. Numerous factors have been identified as correlating with and contributing to underachievement (see Table 1). Seigle (2013) has identified the following factors: low academic self-perceptions, self-efficacy, performance goal valuation, and self-motivation. According to Seigle (2013), underachieving students may demonstrate external attributions, negative attitude toward school and teachers, low metacognitive skills, and maladaptive perfectionism. Many underachievers have one or more of these attributes, but some don't have any (Seigle, 2013). Underachieving students tend to reflect the achievement level of their peer groups rather than their ability group (Seigle, 2013). Family is also seen as a contributing factor. Inconsistent parenting techniques, parents' dissatisfaction with student level of achievement, and parents' beliefs that they know better than the teachers what is good for their child all contribute to underachievement (Seigle, 2013). Underserved populations are often not given the chance to achieve and so become involuntary underachievers (Seigle, 2013).

Rimm (2003) has organized characteristics and factors (see Table 1) into a four-quadrant model contrasting dependent versus dominant behaviors and conformist versus nonconformist behaviors. Many archetypes of underachievement can be sorted into each quadrant to help teachers recognize styles of underachievement when they see them. According to her model, “underachievement occurs when children’s habits, efforts, and skills cause them to lose their sense of control over school outcomes” (2003, p. 425). The school environment factors that Rimm (2003) identifies include an anti-intellectual school atmosphere, an antigifted atmosphere, a rigid classroom environment, teachers who don’t see the quality of the work they are given, unidentified learning disabilities, and a lack of rigor or depth early in school, which can lead to students failing to learn the connection between effort and achievement and/or create a fear of risk-taking. Rimm (2003) also identified several home factors that correlate with underachievement, including poor family relationships between the child and others in the family (at least one parent and perhaps one or more siblings), changes in parenting style from liberal to controlling, considerable discord in the family in general, lack of home models for intrinsic learning, one or more parent displaying discontent with his/her job, and an oppositional relationship between parents and school. Finally, some personal characteristics correlate with underachievement (Rimm, 2003), including low self-esteem; low sense of control over life; learned helplessness; a failure to see connection between effort and success; responsibility avoidance or what is called external attribution in some other literature (Dweck, 2003); and various defense mechanisms, such as perfectionism and the expectation of low grades.

Deslisle and Galbraith (2002) identify different causes and correlations with the two types of underachievement they identify. They assert that the correlative factors and behaviors for underachievers are a lack of challenge at a young enough age, perfectionism, and an overall low self-image. Selective consumers don't see the relevance of certain tasks or goals to their own priorities, and some may be gifted in multiple areas, choosing to develop only certain gifts due to interest and time constraints (Deslisle & Galbraith, 2002).

The contributing factors here identified can be grouped into several broad categories. The first category is student characteristics, including student abilities and interests, defense mechanisms, lack of metacognitive skills, and several (such as goal orientation, fixed mindset, and goal valuation) that can be grouped into what Dweck (2000) broadly names self-theories. Environmental factors include home environment, parental attitudes and modeling, and the school environment, including teacher attitudes, input, and modeling. Finally, the interaction of these factors may create a mismatch of school curriculum to student abilities, interests, and learning preferences, which can lead to a fixed mindset and lack of perception of control (Dweck, 2000; Rimm, 2003; Siegle, 2013). This problem is sometimes compounded with identification (or lack thereof) of gifted students (Johnsen, 2011).

Table 1

Factors Contributing to Underachievement

Type of Factor	Factor
Student Traits ^a	Low academic self-perception/generally low self-esteem (Seigle, 2013; Rimm, 2003)
	Low self-efficacy (Seigle, 2013)
	Low performance goal valuation (Seigle, 2013)
	Low self-motivation (Seigle, 2013)
	External attribution/learned helplessness (Rimm, 2003)
	Low metacognitive skills (Dweck, 2000; Rimm, 2003)
	Maladaptive perfectionism (Rimm, 2003; Deslisle & Galbraith, 2002)
	Low sense of control over life (Rimm, 2003)
	Doesn't see a connection between effort and success (fixed mindset) (Dweck, 2000)
Environmental Factors	Member of underserved/minority population (Seigle, 2013)
	Anti-intellectual school atmosphere (Rimm, 2003)
	Antigifted atmosphere (Rimm, 2003)
	Rigid classroom environment (Rimm, 2003)
	Teachers who don't see the quality of student work (Rimm, 2003)
	Unidentified learning disabilities (Rimm, 2003)
	Lack of rigor/depth in early schooling (Rimm, 2003)
	Inconsistent parenting techniques (particularly changes in style from liberal to controlling) (Seigle, 2013; Rimm, 2003)
	Parents unsatisfied with level of student achievement (Seigle, 2013)
Poor relationship between child and at least one parent (Rimm, 2003)	
Interaction Factors	Considerable general family discord (Rimm, 2003)
	Lack of home models for intrinsic learning (Rimm, 2003)
	Parent discontent with his/her job (Rimm, 2003)
	Mismatch of school curriculum to student abilities and interests (Deslisle & Galbraith, 2002; Dweck, 2000; Rimm, 2003; Siegle, 2013)
Interaction Factors	Negative student attitude toward school and teachers (Rimm, 2003)
	Parents believe they know better than teachers what is good for their child (Seigle, 2013)
	Oppositional relationship between parents and school (Rimm, 2003)

Note. ^aAt time of underachievement

These factors take on special significance when compared to the characteristics of creative students and the characteristics of a traditional school climate. To understand how these factors may interact to create problems for creatively gifted students, educators must grasp the ways that school environments affect achievement.

School Environment

Gallagher (2004) states that “schools can account for as much as 25% of the variance contributing to student achievement” (p. 122). Though many other factors impact achievement and underachievement, school environment is the aspect that schools have the most control over (Deslisle & Galbraith, 2002; Gallagher, 2004; Rimm, 2003; Siegle, 2013). I will explore several factors that influence the school environment: historical influences on the purpose of public schooling; current laws at both the national and state level, including laws about the education of gifted students; and the influence of local practices, including curriculum and classroom climate. I will also present current and past research on how these factors interact with underachievement.

Historical influences. Popkewitz (2011) gives a concise analysis of the history of education in the United States. According to his research, mass public education in the United States began at the turn of the twentieth century. Before that, it was a privilege of the elite and had a religious base (Popkewitz, 2011, p. 5). Once the United States won its independence, American ideals, such as manifest destiny, the importance of the individual, and exceptionalism, began to inform curriculum in the movement known as American Progressive Education. The rise of industrial technologies (such as the railroad) brought an increase in the percentage of people living in cities and in the number of

immigrants entering the country. This influx gave rise to fears tied to what was known as “the Social Question,” in which cities were seen as corruptive of the physical, social, and moral order, and immigrant cultures were seen as inferior, with the potential to undermine American culture. Those who subscribed to the Social Question ideas felt that mass education could be used to ameliorate these problems by disseminating the ideas of the Progressives, re-culturing the immigrant populations, standardizing and disseminating public virtues, and thereby producing self-motivated, self-responsible individuals who would participate in the processes necessary to support the republic (Popkewitz, 2011, p. 13). These influences shaped how curricular subjects were organized, converting ideas and knowledge into school subjects. “School subjects were not invented to teach music or science per se, but were assembled as converting ordinances in relation to modes of life” (Popkewitz, 2011, p. 15). In other words, the organization of schools by subject, and by the specific subjects that were chosen, was a political and cultural one, not one inherent in the subjects themselves. This becomes significant when research shows that creatively gifted students are more likely to engage in cross curricular thinking than typical students (Craft, 2003).

The historical impetus behind the structure and purpose of the public school system is important to consider as it still has ramifications today (Baker, 2009; Popkewitz, 2011). Though education started as a resource restricted to wealthy elite, it since has become a resource available to the masses. In the last century, especially in the decades of the 1960s-1970s, there was a huge upsurge in the number of people completing secondary school and eventually college degrees (Baker, 2009). After an

extensive review of literature, Baker (2009) presents three competing perspectives on education. The first is the idea of education-as-myth, which assumes that schools don't actually help students learn useful skills and thought processes, but instead serve as expensive sorting machines of inherent ability and knowledge, and are by nature biased and oppressive (Baker, 2009). Human capitalists, on the other hand, believe that schools do impart important skills to individuals, that the skills needed by existing jobs drive what is taught, and that education is the main force behind the wage gap (Baker, 2009). Baker (2009) then proposes a synthesis point of view, in which he supports the human capitalist view that schools give important skills, but then asserts that it is not the jobs that drive what skills are taught. Rather, it is the presence of an educated work force and new technologies that transform the nature of work, reinforcing the need for education.

These studies (Baker, 2009; Popkewitz, 2011) reveal several influences on education and its purpose. Education has the purpose of perpetuating and unifying culture (Popkewitz, 2011). It also, through its presence, causes innovation and proliferation to people of different socioeconomic statuses (SESs) and cultures, as well as influencing the economy (Baker, 2009). The first is convergent; the schools as a force for stabilization. The second is divergent; the schools as a force for innovation and change. The balance (or imbalance) of these forces may shape a school's culture and make it a nurturing or unwelcoming place to its various stakeholders, including, in the case of this study, its creatively gifted students.

Education law. Though grant programs are in place to promote high-level programming in education, as well as a national definition of giftedness and standards for

both gifted programming and teacher training in gifted education, at this time, there is no federal mandate for gifted education (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2016a, 2016b). However, laws have had an impact in recent years on gifted education in the United States, specifically, No Child Left Behind (Gallagher, 2004; Klein, 2015).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed in 2002 as a revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Klein, 2015). In 1965, ESEA gave the national government a clear role in K-12 education, tied to Title I funding, which is specifically given for boosting performance of certain groups of students, such as English Language Learners (ELL), students in special education, those from minority groups, and those from low SES households (Klein, 2015). NCLB mandates testing in reading and math in grades 3 through 8, and at least once in high school, with reports divided into subgroups, including each group that receives Title I funding (Klein, 2015). Each state was tasked to define proficiency in these subjects, adopt tests to assess it, and by the 2013-2014 school year, all students were to reach proficiency (Klein, 2015). Severe penalties are levied for not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which is assessed for an entire school and for the before-mentioned subgroups (Klein, 2015).

The penalties in place have not been shown to work as incentives for improvement, and the law has been criticized for its heavy reliance on standardized testing (Gallagher, 2004; Klein, 2015). NCLB has also resulted in a decline in spending on gifted education programs (Beisser, 2008). Teachers feel that it has caused a contraction in the curriculum, pushing them to teach to the test (Gallagher, 2004; Beisser, 2008). Resources have been focused on increasing the achievement of those on the low

end (Gallagher, 2004; Beisser, 2008). Meanwhile, students at the high end are being underserved (Beisser, 2008), and achievement gaps for those at the top are being ignored (Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010).

Since there are no federal mandates for gifted education, it falls to each state to set its own gifted and talented laws and policies. Colorado (where the study takes place) is one of 23 states to mandate and partially fund gifted education (only four mandate and fully fund programming; Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2017). Colorado defines giftedness as follows:

Gifted children means those persons between the ages of five and twenty-one whose abilities, talents, and potential for accomplishment are so exceptional or developmentally advanced that they require special provisions to meet their educational programming needs. Gifted and talented children are hereafter referred to as gifted students. Children under five who are gifted may also be provided with early childhood special educational services. Gifted students include gifted students with disabilities (i.e., twice-exceptional) and students with exceptional abilities or potential from all socio-economic and ethnic, cultural populations. Gifted students are capable of high performance, exceptional production, or exceptional learning behavior by virtue of any or a combination of these areas of giftedness:

- General or specific intellectual ability
- Specific academic aptitude
- Creative or productive thinking
- Leadership abilities
- Visual arts, performing arts, musical or psychomotor abilities (NAGC, 2013)

Guidelines for the identification of gifted students in Colorado were recently revised (Medina, 2016). The guidelines emphasize the importance of using a body of evidence—without the use of cut-off scores—to identify students as gifted. Particularly germane to this study is specific language that “a score at the 95th percentile or above on a creativity test is not required for identification in this area” (Medina, 2016, p. 9,

underlining in the original), language which urges the use of behavior observation scales for identifying creatively gifted students, and finally, specification that students identified will be coded to show category of giftedness (p. 20). Language in the new guidelines states that evidence of high achievement using multiple measures does not require confirmation of a students' gifts by some measure of *g* (general intelligence—often measured by IQ tests; Medina, 2016, p. 21). These changes have the potential to help change the focus of gifted identification and programming away from predominantly serving intellectually gifted students (Clark & Zimmerman, 1983, p. 180) to serving gifted students in all categories under the state definition.

Local practices. Lots of resources have been published on what makes good programming for gifted students at a local level (e.g., Callahan & Herberg-Davis, 2013; Callahan & Moon, 2007; Cash, 2011; Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Davis, Rimm, & Siegle, 2011; Kingore, 2013; Purcell & Eckert, 2006; Renzulli, 1986; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson et al., 2003). The factors that affect good programming mirror those that affect underachievement at school. These factors include a match of challenge level to student, grouping students with like-ability peers for a significant part of each day, self-pacing, emotional support for students from teachers (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, Rogers & McCormick, 2010; Purcell and Eckert, 2006), and teacher belief in learning/mastery orientation (Dweck, 2000; Hong, Harzell & Greene, 2009). Also important is teacher training in the needs of gifted students (Gallagher, 2001; Hong, Hartzell & Greene, 2009; Tannenbaum, 2003). Finally, programming must provide opportunities for students to explore their strengths, so that latent gifts and talents can emerge and be identified, and

curriculum of the appropriate level of challenge to develop these skills can be provided (Davis, 2003; Purcell & Eckert, 2006; Roberts, 2008; Tomlinson et al. 2003).

While many studies have been completed on effective programming in schools for gifted students, as well as studies on specific populations of gifted students including studies of the differences in gifted students by gender (e.g., Kerr & Nicpon, 2003), students gifted in math (e.g., Yun, Chung, Jang, Kim & Jeong, 2011), in visual arts (e.g., Szekely, 1982), as well as different racial groups (e.g., Ford, 2003) and twice exceptional students (e.g., Reis & McCoach, 2002b), few studies have been specific to students gifted in creativity. Some programs that foster creativity have been shown to have positive affects for all gifted students enrolled in them (Renzulli & Reis, 1997). However, only a few studies deal specifically with creativity in the classroom (Hong et al, 2009; Siegel & Kaemmerer, 1978; Yeung, Chow & Chow, 2005). Rather, the bulk of research on creativity has focused on eminent adults or on empirical studies in controlled environments (Feldman & Benjamin, 2006)

Hong et al. (2009) found that classroom climate is a major influencing factor in how well students succeed. They examined the epistemological beliefs of 178 teachers of third through fifth grade in a large metropolitan school district and observed how these influenced instructional practices that promote creativity. They found that instructional practices that promote creativity—practices including using multiple perspectives in problem solving, promoting transfer of knowledge from one task to others, task commitment, and use of creative skills—correlated with teachers having a learning goal

orientation, and teachers' motivation to do their own creative activities (Hong et al., 2009).

Siegel and Kaemmerer (1978) developed a tool—the Siegel Scale of Support for Innovation (SSSI) to assess organizational climates on five dimensions hypothesized to be related to innovation. They ran tests for this tool, eventually utilizing 1899 students, and 144 teachers from traditional high schools to develop the final form of the SSSI, and 22 students and seven teachers from innovative high schools to validate the tool. The final factors they determined were important for influencing innovative climates were support for creativity, tolerance of differences, and personal commitment or ownership.

Gifted students need exposure to various subjects, ideas, and ways of learning to discover their strengths, along with programming at an appropriate level to allow them to develop these strengths (Purcell & Eckert, 2006). They benefit from challenging curriculum, self-pacing, choice/agency, and emotional support from their teachers and general environment (Dweck, 2000; Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2010; Gallagher, 2001). For an environment to be supportive of creativity, it must have a learning goal orientation, opportunities for motivational work (often related to challenge and agency), and tolerance of differences (Hong et al., 2009; Siegel & Kaemmerer, 1978).

To better understand whether creatively gifted students are being provided exposure, development opportunities, adequate challenge, opportunities for choice, and a supportive environment, educators must better understand creativity itself. I will then tie the characteristics of creativity and the match between needs and environment to the

possibilities of underachievement for creatively gifted students in the public school setting.

Creativity

What exactly is creativity? This question has been a source of dispute in the field of creativity research, as different researchers use different definitions and models, leading to different—sometimes contradictory—conclusions about creativity and how it interacts with other factors under study (Jauk, Benedek, Dunst & Neubauer, 2012). I will discuss several models of creativity, including information about ways that creativity is researched, along with some information gleaned from the different approaches. I will then show how this information about creativity ties in with both the school environment and with what is known at this time from the few studies that link creativity, school environment, and underachievement.

Definitions and models. Csikszentmihalyi (1999) has proposed a systems model for creativity. The three components of this model are the individual (the person with the idea), the domain (the area of knowledge that the new idea will add to or change), and the field (experts in the domain who serve as gatekeepers, deciding whether to sanction the new idea, thereby allowing it to change the domain; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 315). According to this model, creativity is dependent on the judgement of society, and an idea is therefore creative at some points in time, but not in others. Van Gough, whose work was rejected at the time of its creation, was not creative in his own time (according to the systems model) but became creative when his work was accepted as valuable to the culture years after his death (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, p. 31).

Sternberg and Kaufman (2002) propose the propulsion model, defining eight types of creativity (in this model, “field” is roughly equivalent to “domain” in Csikszentmihalyi’s model): *replication*, which shows that a given field of knowledge is where it should be; *redefinition*, which redefines a field from a new point of view; *forward incrementation*, which moves a field forward in the direction in which it is already going, in an amount it is ready to advance; *advanced forward incrementation*, which moves a field forward in a direction in which it is already going, but to a point beyond where others are ready to go; *redirection*, which changes the direction of a field; *reconstruction/redirection*, which goes to an earlier point in the field’s development, then takes it from that point in a different direction; *reinitiation*, which finds a new starting point for the field and then moves it in a different direction, creating a paradigm shift; and *integration*, putting together parts of contributions once seen as distinct or opposed, resulting in a new place different from where the field was.

Sternberg (2012, see also Sternberg & Lubart, 1991) has proposed the investment theory of creativity, in which he states, “Creative people are the ones who are willing and able to ...[pursue] ideas that are unknown or out of favor, but that have growth potential” (Sternberg, 2012, p. 5). In this model, creativity requires six resources: *intellectual* resources, which are synthetic, analytic and practical (see Sternberg, Castejon, Prieto, Hautamaki & Grigorenko, 2001); enough *knowledge* to move beyond current knowledge in the field, but not to be restrained by it; *styles of thinking* that favor thinking in new ways, both globally and locally; a *personality* that is willing to take risks, overcome obstacles, and tolerate ambiguity, along with strong self-efficacy; intrinsic and task-

focused *motivation*; and an *environment* that is supportive and rewarding of creative ideas (Sternberg, 2012; Sternberg & Lubart, 1991).

Finally (though far from exhaustively), the levels of creativity model was proposed by Kaufman and Beghetto (2012). According to this model, creativity has four levels. The first, the mini-c level, is subjective and vital to learning in which individuals engage in a behavior that is novel to them. The second level, little-c, is an everyday type of creativity which is context-specific in which individuals create something that is novel and appropriate in their local context. At the third level, Pro-c, individuals' contributions are regularly acknowledged in their field at a professional level. The fourth level, Big-C, includes ideas that have global impact over time.

In all these models, creativity is both original and appropriate or useful, though how and when something is judged to be appropriate or useful may be different depending on model and context. Therefore, throughout this study, I will define creativity as the generation of ideas that are original and appropriate or useful.

Ways of looking at creativity. Creativity has been studied in many ways. Among these approaches are cognitive studies, which study the thinking processes that lead to creative production; psychometric studies, which operationalize the creative cognitive processes and create ways to measure them; and social-personality studies, which identify traits common to creative people and their interactions with their environment (Sternberg, 1999).

Runco and Chad (1995) find three primary cognitive practices used in creativity, supported by two contributing factors. The primary factors are *problem finding*, which

consists of identifying a problem, defining the problem, and working to find a solution to the problem; *ideation*, which consists of associative ideation (ideas linked in a chain, with those furthest from the starting point being the most original) and divergent ideation, which represents an estimate of the potential for creative thought; and *evaluative processes*, which include critical evaluation, appreciative valuation, inter- and intrapersonal evaluation, and evaluation skills using criteria of correctness or of originality and creativity (Runco & Chad, 1995). The supporting factors are *knowledge*, consisting of facts and procedural knowledge, and *motivation*, which both cognitive and learning styles influence (Runco & Chad, 1995).

In another study of creative cognition, Ward, Saunders, and Dodd (1998) studied groups of gifted and nongifted adolescents and college students, giving them the creative task to create drawings and descriptions of “alien fruit.” Some of each group were given instructions to be creative, others (the control groups) were not given this instruction. They found that the instructions caused the nongifted students to generate ideas that were more original than the control group but made no difference in the originality of ideas from the gifted groups. Several ideational strategies were used by participants, and the researchers found that concept expansion (starting from a specific model—in this case a quintessential fruit like an apple rather than an unusual fruit like a kumquat) led to the least original ideas. Originality was linked to fluency (ability to come up with a lot of ideas) and flexibility (variety of ideas). The authors conclude that “generating new ideas is cognitively demanding, and people tend to simplify the task by pursuing ideas that come readily to mind” (p. 261).

Psychometric researchers operationalize cognitive processes to measure them. Dr. E. Paul Torrance first designed his Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT) in 1966 and has revised it four times since then (Kim, 2006). The test has operationalized five variables in its latest (1998) version: fluency (flexibility was illuminated due to high correlation with fluency), originality, elaboration, abstractness of titles (adopting abstract approaches to generate ideas), and resistance to premature closure (Kim, 2006). While Torrance himself did not think that his test assessed all dimensions of creativity and found it inadequate as a sole diagnostic tool for creativity, it is the most widely used tool for identification of creatively gifted children (Kim, 2006).

Social-personality studies focus on the personality traits of creative individuals and their experiences. These studies are often based on interviews of creatively eminent individuals and so focus on Pro- and Big-C levels of creativity (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). Creative people in all domains tend to display the ability to find problems, visualize, think analogically, evaluate, analyze, synthesize, transform, regress, extend boundaries, use intuition, predict outcomes, resist premature closure, use concentration, use logical and aesthetic thinking, and tackle problems and situations playfully (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011, pp. 211-212). Csikszentmihalyi (2013) adds complexity of personality, curiosity, interest in what things are like and how they work, and a fluid attention that constantly processes what is going on around the individual (p. 53), as well as the ability to enjoy the process of creation for its own sake. Creative people can “move from one extreme to the other as the occasion requires” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, p. 57) without feeling the contradiction between things that most people see as separate, where

one pole may be perceived as bad. Creative people alternate between extremes of physical energy and rest, between being smart and naïve, between playful and disciplined, between reality and fantasy, between extroversion and introversion, between humility and pride, between masculine and feminine, between rebellious independence and internalization of accepted beliefs and knowledge, between being passionate and objective about their own work, and between pain and joy experienced due to their openness and sensitivity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013).

Not all personality traits of creative individuals are seen as positive traits in all situations, and they may manifest in what is seen as negative behaviors (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Yeung et al., 2005). In a 2005 study of disaffected gifted youth in Hong Kong secondary schools by Yeung et al., “the students who were perceived to be disruptive showed higher levels of originality and imagination” than nondisruptive students (p. 285). Csikszentmihalyi (2013) discusses ways that various personality traits and behaviors of creatively eminent people are perceived in a negative light. “Divergent thinking is often perceived as deviant by the majority” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, p. 74). Csikszentmihalyi (2013) also argues that humans have limited attention, and that this limited attention is one of the reasons that creative individuals or behaviors may be perceived negatively. Creative people may seem odd, arrogant, selfish, and ruthless as they allocate their attention to what they deem important and ignore or forget things that others deem important, like remembering people’s names or respecting others’ plans that are in their way (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, p. 10). He continues:

Creative people are neither single-minded, specialized, nor selfish. Indeed, they seem to be the opposite: They love to make connections with adjacent areas of knowledge. They tend to be—in principle—caring and sensitive. Yet the demands of their role inevitably push them toward specialization and selfishness. Of the many paradoxes of creativity, this is perhaps the most difficult to avoid (p. 10).

This is important to consider when looking at creative underachiever motivation and Deslisle and Galbraith's (2002) idea of selective consumerism. If creative students decide that the curriculum they are being presented is irrelevant, they may ignore it and use their school time "recharging their batteries" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, p. 58).

Social-personality studies also cross over with psychometric studies when they attempt to operationalize and test the effect of the environment on creative behavior, as in the earlier mentioned study of the SSSI (Siegle & Kaemmerer, 1978) and a newer study of the instrument KEYS: Assessing the Climate for Creativity (Amabile et al., 1996). This assessment, designed and validated for companies, not schools, found six aspects of the work environment "discriminate most strongly between high- and low-creativity projects" (Amabile et al., 1996, p. 1171). The six aspects were challenging work, organizational encouragement, work group supports, freedom, organizational impediments (which negatively impacted creativity), and supervisory encouragement (Amabile et al. 1996).

Though this test was designed for work environments, not schools, the impacting factors are remarkably similar to those impacting creative environments in the classroom, gifted programming in general, and underachievement. The key factors that emerge from the literature presented so far are level of challenge, supportive people and environments, and agency (including sense of control and growth mindset). The question then becomes,

how do these factors (along with creative personality traits and existing school environments) combine?

Creative Characteristics and School Environment: A Recipe for Underachievement?

Empirical work on the study of creativity was sparked in the United States in 1950 by Guilford's Presidential Address to the American Psychology Association (Feldman & Benjamin, 2006). At that time, creativity was seen as technological innovation, though by the 1960s the definition of creativity had shifted to mean rebellious and unconventional ideas, and from 1975 to the present, research has focused, in general, on creativity as recognized work of major significance and on creativity in context (Feldman & Benjamin, 2006). In the decades since 1950, the research focusing on creativity in education was significant only in the 1960s (Feldman & Benjamin, 2006), and the definition of creativity as well as the context of education have both changed significantly since that time.

Both Kim, in his 2008 review of literature, and Yeung et al. in their 2005 study of disaffected gifted youth in Hong Kong postulate that the mismatch between creative behaviors and personality traits and the school environment creates gifted underachievement. But neither study the phenomenon directly as it manifests in secondary schools in the United States. To determine if this connection is warranted here, educators must look at the three major school components of underachievement: challenge, supportive environment (or lack thereof) and agency.

Challenge and the creatively gifted. In a secondary public school setting, there are many factors that may contribute to lack of challenge for creatively gifted students. As has already been stated, for latent abilities to grow into actual achievement, students need exposure, skill development, and a curriculum that challenges these emerging gifts as well as the ones that are fully realized (Davis, 2003; Purcell & Eckert, 2006; Roberts, 2008; Tomlinson et al. 2003). Dweck (2000) argues that potential cannot be measured, only achievement in a specific place and time, and Feldman and Benjamin (2006) argue that creativity testing does little to predict future creative accomplishment, due to its dependence on context and domain. If this is the case, for creatively gifted students to be identified, they must have exposure to opportunities to express their creativity so it can manifest. Once it has manifested, it can be assessed, and appropriate differentiation for the needs of the student can be devised. The question then becomes, Are students getting these exposure opportunities, especially in public schools? Also, is differentiation being provided when these gifts do manifest?

Traditionally, gifted programs focused on academics (Clark & Zimmerman, 1983). Though specific programming for musical and artistic challenge level has been studied, except in the context of overall gifted systems (e.g., Renzulli & Reis, 1997), little research explores whether creatively gifted students are receiving an appropriate level of creative challenge. Some of the lack of study may be caused by the lack of readily available test subjects due to inconsistencies in determining who is creatively gifted, and the traditional lack of focus in this area of gifted education (Clark & Zimmerman, 1983). NCLB, and its concomitant narrowing of curriculum (Klein, 2015) has the potential to

have a limiting effect on creative programming, particularly if the main curricular areas in which students receive creative opportunities are those that are being cut (including the arts and gifted programming in general), and if this law shifts focus in the classroom toward achievement instead of learning (Kingore, 2013). It is worth exploring whether adequate challenge in creativity is available across subjects in specific secondary public school settings.

Supportive environment for the creatively gifted. As discussed earlier, a clear tension exists between the impetus for conformity and that for innovation in public schools (Baker, 2009; Feldman & Benjamin, 2006; Popkewitz, 2011). How this tension manifests will differ in different schools, as can be seen in validation studies for tests of innovative environments (Siegle & Kaemerer, 1978). These differences can also manifest from classroom to classroom within a single school (Freund & Holling, 2008; Siegle and Kaemerer, 1978). People who are in an environment friendly to and supportive of their creativity are likely to be more creative (Amabile et al., 1996; Siegle & Kraemerer, 1978). Gifted students in general do better if they are allowed to work deeply in their area(s) of strength (Rogers, 2007; Tomlinson et al. 2003). So, is creativity something that teachers and schools support? Are there aspects of the creative personality likely to put creatively gifted students at odds with their teachers and schools?

Level of teacher support for creatively gifted students varies from teacher to teacher and likely depends on several factors (Siegel & Kaemerer, 1978). These factors include how much the teacher tolerates diversity (possibly an indication of resistance to closure or incremental self-theories; Siegel & Kaemerer, 1978). Also included is a factor

the researchers call “personal commitment” (Siegel & Kaemerer, 1978, p. 560), which has to do with the match between the individual’s (in this case, student’s) goals and the goals of the organization (in this case, the school or classroom).

Craft (2003) points out that, though creativity in many western countries has been seen as a universal good for economies, countries, and individuals, since the late 1990s, this idea has some issues. These issues include dissimilarities in what different stakeholders mean by “creativity,” conflicts between policies and educational practices, curriculum organizational issues (specifically, that most curriculums are divided by subject but creativity, by its nature, tends to lead people to cross curricular boundaries for new ideas), limitations set by central control of pedagogy, the different ways that different cultures value (or don’t value) creativity, environment (for instance, innovation for innovation’s sake, designing obsolescence into products and perhaps, thereby, creating environmental catastrophe, may not be considered ethical), and the fact that creativity can be used for negative as well as positive ends. If these issues are not addressed, programming for creativity may not be a universal good (Craft, 2003).

The distaste for some creative personality traits and behaviors may not simply be a matter of ignorance, but a true reaction to the downsides of creativity. Kaufman and Beghetto (2013) outline certain stereotypes about creative people, including that they have a higher incidence of mental health issues (which has not generally been found to be the case), and studies have shown negative personal attributes associated with creativity, including hypomania, anxiety, disagreeableness, hostility, and arrogance (p. 158). Creativity also demands both time and resources (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013). Teachers

are often unclear on the definitions of creativity, and often show dislike for how creativity can manifest, particularly risk-taking, impulsiveness, disruptiveness, nonconformism, and emotionality. Kaufman and Beghetto (2013) argue that the solution is for teachers and students to work directly on creative metacognition, “a combination of creative self-knowledge (knowing one’s own creative thoughts and limitations, both within a domain and as a general trait) and contextual knowledge (knowing when, where, how, and why to be creative)” (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013, p. 160). This combines well with findings by Baum, Renzulli and Herbert (1995) that metacognitive instruction helps alleviate underachievement, as long as a context continues to exist in which students are allowed to use their creativity.

Even with these creative downsides in mind, many companies value innovative skills, and creativity has been specified as an important 21st century skill (Noddings, 2013). If public schools in the United States are to support it, then they must evaluate whether climates within schools and classrooms are creativity friendly, or if these settings encourage students to constantly conform. Though Yeung et al. (2005) have studied school climates in Hong Kong for their support of creativity, I have not found any studies on this subject on secondary public schools in the United States.

Self-theories and the creatively gifted. The literature already discussed emphasizes the importance of agency: a sense of control over one’s life and actions, and belief in one’s abilities to be able to handle difficulties. Dweck (2000) has spent 30 years studying factors that affect a person’s sense of agency and concludes that agency is largely dependent upon a person’s self-theories. Positive self-theories contain several

components: a belief in malleable (not fixed) intelligence/abilities; a mastery pattern of problem-solving (not helpless pattern), which is directly shaped by praise and criticism; an orientation toward learning goals (defining accomplishment by amount of personal growth), not performance goals (defining accomplishment by comparing one's performance to that of others); and entity versus incrementalist implicit theories (beliefs about whether factors such as intelligence or math ability are fixed or can change due to effort), and how this relates to goals and definitions of failure, as well as judgement of others (Dweck, 2000). Entity theorists have more difficulty adapting to challenges as they see them as threats to their identities, while incrementalists believe that their abilities can be affected by effort (Dweck, 2000). Dweck (2000) doesn't argue that innate ability doesn't exist or affect achievement, but rather that actions of teachers and others can help move students toward incrementalist implicit theories, which give these students a sense of control over their problems and help positively affect achievement.

Basic beliefs about creativity in this country are often based on an entity implicit theory: some people are just born talented, and the rest of us might as well not even try because we just don't have "it" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). A belief also exists that creative people are odd and tormented, perhaps psychologically unbalanced (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013). If beliefs about creativity steer creatively gifted students into entity implicit theorization, these beliefs could make them more likely than others to underachieve when they face a challenge. If they are praised for implicit abilities ("You are so creative!") rather than effort ("You worked so hard to refine that idea!"), this also reinforces entity theories. Yet, eminent creative people

studied have a vastly different lived experience than the entity theorist would predict and must work hard, mastering the knowledge in their fields and doggedly pursuing ideas over years of effort (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, 2013). They need luck, access to their domain and field, and resiliency of character (which is tied to self-theories) to produce creatively (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Winner & Martino, 2003). Differences in self-theories may be a crucial factor in determining whether or not a creatively gifted person will become a creatively productive adult.

NCLB and the move toward standardization supports entity theorization by comparing students to a fixed scale (performance goals, not learning goals), especially when the tests used may not be able to effectively evaluate adequate yearly progress (AYP) amongst the most able (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2012; Plucker et al. 2010). Also, with allocation of resources moving away from creative areas of the curriculum (at some schools) and toward the core subjects (Klein, 2015), creative students may feel that schools (and by extension society) don't value their strengths as much as the ability to do well on the standardized assessments of these subjects. In terms of performance goals, then, creatively gifted students who underachieve are less valued in these situations than high achieving students. This may cause them to become selective consumers, achieving in arenas outside of school, and conserving their energy in school by not pushing themselves to achieve (Deslisle & Galbraith, 2002).

Deficit in the Literature

Few studies have been conducted on underachievement of creatively gifted students in U.S. public school settings. Though Kim (2008) sets out compelling

arguments for high abilities in creativity as a cause of underachievement in school, his article is a synthesis of literature, and lacks the confirmative component of direct research. Yeung et al. (2005) conducted this direct research, but this study took place in Hong Kong, and so may not apply directly to secondary schools in the United States, due to the contextual differences that exist between the two school systems and cultures.

Few, if any, recent (within the last 20 years) studies directly research creative underachievement in U.S. secondary schools. Study after study reviewed here mention a lack of research on this subject in context (e.g., Amabile et al., 2005; Feldman & Benjamin, 2008; Freud & Holling, 2008; Hong et al. 2009). Many programs for the gifted have been proposed and show positive results for underachievers (Renzulli, 1986). Though some use creative strategies and programming (e.g., Renzulli & Reis, 1997) to achieve positive results, they have not targeted creative underachievers per se, nor have they specifically looked at the relationship between creativity and underachievement, and their implementation may require major changes to overall teaching practices that some districts might be reluctant to support. Creativity is context specific (Czikszentmihali, 2013). Therefore, to understand how it interacts with underachievement, and how to limit or reverse creative underachievement in the United States and specific school sites, one must to study this phenomenon in context. The confusion of definitions of all components of this phenomenon make it important to understand exactly what underachievement of creative students is in its essence. A closer look at the lived experiences of stakeholders may suggest incremental changes that could be easier for a district to adopt.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

As a qualitative researcher, I recognize that the world is socially constructed, complex, and in flux (Sloan & Bowe, 2013). My understanding of this principle is influenced by the methodology of research I will be using: phenomenology.

Phenomenology is an effective way to understand the common experiences of individuals in order to develop appropriate and effective policies (Creswell, 2013). It focuses on getting to the essence of a phenomenon, in this case, the underachievement of creatively gifted high school students (Creswell, 2013). This focus is important, as students are in a context in which they have little power compared to other stakeholders, including teachers and parents (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative [CITI], 2016b; Creswell, 2013). Student voices may not be heard, and the importance of their experience of this phenomenon may not have as much influence in shaping responsive policies and procedures as the experiences of other stakeholders. By giving voice to the lived experience of many stakeholders, with special emphasis on the experiences of students, I hope to shed new light on this phenomenon, and to help inform policy change for their benefit. Because phenomenologists believe that reality can only be understood in terms of how an individual perceives it, this study is based in my perceptions, and I will be using the first-person voice.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenology is based on work of philosopher Edmund Husserl, who sought to reach true meaning through a deeper understanding of the relationship between consciousness and the objects that are experienced (Sloan & Bowe, 2013). He sought a global view of the essence of meanings being investigated through generic description, objectivizing human experience (Sloan & Bowe, 2013).

According to this philosophy, human behavior is based on the experiences of individuals, not on an objective physical reality external to the individual (Sloan & Bowe, 2013). Experiences are conscious: the reality of an object is linked to one's consciousness of it; therefore, subject and object are not separate, but connected (Creswell, 2013).

According to Martin Heidegger, who further developed Husserl's ideas, objects (or, as he preferred to call them, *zeng*, meaning stuff or equipment) had two ways of being: *zuhanden* (ready-to-hand, also known as availability) and *vorhanden* (present-to-hand, also known as occurrence) (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015). Humans experience an object's availability when we are using it in context for a purpose; we experience its occurrence when we observe (or, as Heidegger said, "gawk" at) its features, such as shape, color, material make-up, without thought of context or use (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015; van Manen, 2014). Heidegger maintained that availability precedes occurrence, and that people can only make sense of the occurrent features of things within our own familiarity with a world of available equipment (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015, p. 49). Encountering equipment as an engaged user is, therefore, a better way of understanding equipment than just observing features (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015). This engagement lends a sense of

wholeness, as people engage with the world with an attitude of “in order to” that can only artificially be detached from experience of the world (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015; van Manen, 2014).

I have seen the difference between availability and occurrence play out repeatedly in my classroom, particularly in my Drawing I class. Students arrive believing they should be able to draw familiar objects realistically because these objects are familiar (ready-to-hand). However, realistic representation of objects requires an understanding and awareness of feature, shape, color, and value (shading) in a way that divorces it from the familiar (present-to-hand). Changing perception of an object from availability to occurrence is a learned process. Availability of the familiar is always immediate and precedes occurrence unless an object is completely unfamiliar.

To be an engaged user, one must have basic skills of use, and such skills disclose the world, allowing us to perceive availability and, therefore, occurrence (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015; van Manen, 2014). Such skills are interconnected, purposeful, and culturally inflected (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015; Sloan & Bowe, 2013). Heidegger argues that there is no core self, but rather a manifold and context-specific sense of self based on existential possibilities (ways of being that make sense in a specific context; Kaufer & Chamero, 2015, van Manen, 2014). These possibilities are the closest that one can come to a “true self,” and since they are context dependent (i.e., I see myself as a daughter and sister when I am with my family and as a teacher when I am with my students at school), they are constantly in flux, not finished or attained (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015).

Existential possibilities shape perception, what one chooses to pay attention to and how one perceives the availability of equipment (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015). One can act in a social role (e.g., student, teacher, father, priest) without actually conceiving that role as an existential possibility (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015). If one does this, one's actual existential possibility—not one's social role in that context—shapes one's experiences (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015). In such a case, people who are playing a social role will not perceive or interact in the way that they would if it were a true existential possibility: different things will matter to them, and they may not be competent in an appropriate or coherent way to the role (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015).

The many branches of phenomenology have varying research procedures and levels of structure within these procedures. I will be using hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is both descriptive (phenomenological) and interpretive (hermeneutic; van Manen, 1990, p. 26). “It has been said that *the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics is that there is no method* (Gadamer, 1975; Rorty, 1979)! . . . Yet there is a tradition, a body of knowledge and insights, a history of thinkers and authors, which, taken as an example, constitutes both a source and a methodological ground” (van Manen, 1990, pp. 29-30, italics in the original). The process and method of hermeneutic phenomenology involves writing and rewriting, using the writing process to interrogate gathered text (including interviews, observations, and artifacts such as artwork or musical performance), and creating a space where dialog between these and previous research are possible, thus creating a piece of writing that helps the reader to understand the prereflective experience and to reflect upon it (van Manen, 2014).

Phenomenological research “is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10).

Rationale

Underachievement is a complex phenomenon, and the interaction of context (culture, school, curricula, friend groups, home, parental expectations, and the environment) with those who experience the phenomenon from various viewpoints (students, teachers, and parents) is considered an important contributing factor (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Figg, Rogers, McCormick, & Low, 2012; Kim, 2008; Neihart, 2006; Reis & McCoach, 2002a, 2002b). Because phenomenology considers the interaction between experience and phenomenon to be integrated (Kaufman & Chamero, 2015), it is an ideal standpoint from which to view underachievement.

The ability to hold the truth of seeming opposites is a characteristic of many creatively gifted individuals (Csikzentmihalyi, 2013). The interconnectedness of subject and object in phenomenology, for me, holds some similarity with this characteristic, and it may bring insight to this aspect of the experiences of creatively gifted students who underachieve. Both visual art (in my experience) and phenomenology use specifics of experience to reveal the universal and the possible.

Phenomenology’s emphasis on skills as necessary for experiencing equipment for use in this philosophy is also key. Creativity is partially dependent on level of skill and knowledge in a particular domain and cannot manifest, particularly at high levels, without exposure and skill development (Sternberg & Lubart, 1991). Phenomenology’s views on

skills, and how they shape perception of context—including cultural influences—is directly in line with these ideas.

Because phenomenology acknowledges the difference in perception between those who are engaged in an activity on a genuine (existential possibility) and artificial (social role) level (Kaufman & Chamero, 2015), its methods should help to untangle this aspect of various stakeholders' experiences of creatively gifted underachievement, particularly when students take on artificial social roles in the classroom. The overlap—or lack of overlap—between stakeholders' perceived realities is of particular interest to this study because it may inform the phenomenon of creative underachievement. If a teacher and a student do not perceive the same possibilities and courses of action in a situation (or do not perceive the same options as appropriate), this could be a source of discord. If a student doesn't perceive success in a classroom as a possibility, the student will struggle to achieve (Dweck, 2000).

Setting and Population

To better understand underachievement in creatively gifted high school students, I investigated this phenomenon as it manifests at an urban cluster high school in a small district in northern Colorado, with an enrollment of 1462 students at the time I gathered data. It is the only high school in the district, but current growth has necessitated plans for a second high school, to be built in 2018. Approximately 81% of the student body is white, the majority of the rest are Hispanic, with a small percentage in other racial groups (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2014a). Just under 20% receive free and reduced lunch (CDE, 2014b).

While there is a robust gifted and talented (GATE) program in the district's elementary and middle schools, it has, historically, emphasized identification of students with academic gifts and is currently working on ways to bring identification procedures in line with new Colorado laws, which mandate identification for all areas of state-recognized giftedness. Currently, no functioning GATE program is available at the high school. Students are not generally identified once they reach this age, no GATE staff are on site, and the counselors have little-to-no training in GATE. Counseling and administration are both understaffed due to district growth (in combination with Colorado's "negative factor" in funding). This has hampered efforts to implement interventions for students needing extra support (tier 2 of the Response to Intervention or RtI model). These site-specific issues could be contributing factors to the issue of creative underachievement at this school.

The year of the study was out of the ordinary in that the community endured an unusual number of deaths. From May of 2016 through May of 2017, at least eight deaths of current students and recent graduates occurred, including a student who completed suicide after leaving class to go just off campus and shoot himself. While these deaths and the deaths of a few other community members (particularly a retired bus driver many students felt close to) may not have affected participant experience of underachievement, they had a heavy impact on the culture and context in which the study took place.

Participants

The study site has only recently begun putting systems in place to identify students as gifted in nonacademic areas (including creativity), and no functioning

identification system exists at the high school level (Sutter & Burden, 2016). Therefore, identifying creatively gifted students who underachieve by a comparison of tested potential at the gifted level and current school achievement (as would usually be done using the discrepancy model of underachievement) is impractical and might skew the sample toward those who are academically gifted (Reis & McCoach, 2002a, 2002b).

Therefore, my community partner at the school began recruitment with an email to all parents of students at the site (see Appendix B). The email explains that a study will be conducted over the 2016-2017 school year, focusing on creatively gifted students who underachieve. *Creatively gifted*, and *underachievement* are defined in the email. From this initial pool (a total of 12 students), any students who were in my classes during the 2016-2017 school year were eliminated (though students with whom I had contact in previous years were not). I divided the remaining eight students into two pools by gender. From these pools, I chose three male and three female students to invite into the study based on conversations with the parents and, in three cases, my own previous experience working with the students. I gave these students and their parents consent and assent forms, explaining the study. One student was rejected for the study based on an identified learning disability that I felt would highlight a different phenomenon than the underachievement of creatively gifted high school students (though some other students with disabilities did participate in the study). Another was declined due to late response—previous candidates had already been accepted and the candidate pool was full. Recruitment, consent, and assent documents were all IRB-approved.

After student participants were chosen, teachers were invited into the study through an IRB-approved recruitment email (see Appendix B). From the initial pool of 12 teacher volunteers, six were chosen to represent a wide range of subject matter, grade level, and challenge level. This number balanced the number of student participants and allowed for input from teachers from a range of content areas. Teachers were then given IRB-approved consent forms. I did not check to see if student participants were in these teachers' classes as that could endanger participant confidentiality.

This system minimized risk to the participants in the following ways: I was the only one who had access to the names in the candidate pools, and I changed names and other identity signifiers at the point of data collection or analysis (for instance, students were asked to choose their own pseudonyms at the beginning of the first interview). All data has been kept on DU's server, and raw sources (such as tapes and artifacts) were stored in my home safe when not in use. I did not access any actual school records of participants at any time during the study.

I minimized risks to emotional health in the following ways: I told participants that the study emphasized the importance of the essence of participant experiences and was not about assigning blame. Listening to the participant's experiences and point of view were the core of the data collection procedures. I structured the interview questions to establish rapport before broaching emotional topics. I informed all participants of procedures in place to minimize risks to their confidentiality. Participants were given the chance to opt out of the study, or any part of the study (including specific interview questions) at any time with no penalty.

Research Design

Because “the reality of an object is only perceived within the experience of an individual” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78), techniques used for gathering data in phenomenology emphasize the use of open-ended in-depth interviews, diaries/journals of those who experience the phenomenon under study, and observations of the phenomenon by the researcher (van Manen, 1990). I based my data collection and analysis techniques on procedures delineated by van Manen in his book *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (1990).

Interviews are the first and most important data collection instrument used in this study. I have conducted two open-ended audiotaped interviews per student in the study. The first established rapport and explored experiences of both creativity and underachievement. The second provided an opportunity to revisit ideas after initial processing of the first interview, and to go into further depth. It also allowed me to explore with the student the differences in experience from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. I conducted a similar single interview with each parent participant.

I also observed one class taught by each teacher participant. At that time, I documented my observations in a research journal. After the observation, I conducted an interview with each teacher participant.

I collected artifacts of students’ creative passions between the first and second student interview. The form of this documentation depended on the students’ areas of creativity, including video recordings of performances, and photographs of artwork. The

first interview gave me information on student passion area(s) and allowed me to plan to observe and document existing artifacts of student creativity.

At the first interview, I asked students to journal or otherwise express their ongoing experiences of interactions with the school and others that they felt were relevant to their underachievement at least once a week. All students chose to do this in a written or drawn format, in journals or sketchbooks I provided. I hoped that the process of keeping these journals would assist them in becoming conscious of the phenomenon, adding reflexivity to their experience (Sloan & Bowe, 2013), and perhaps add depth to the second interview, but my expectations of journal completion were low. Only three students returned journals at the second interview, and these added little to their and my understanding of the phenomenon.

As part of the phenomenological procedure, I asked participants to review my writings about their experiences both to empower the participants as co-constructors of the research and to check for accuracy as the writing progressed (Sloan & Bowe, 2013). Although van Manen (1990) describes this interaction as a type of interview, for clarity I designated this review as a separate step. Many participants opted to give me written feedback rather than talking to me directly about the writing. These exchanges took place over email until the writing fit the experience of the participant.

Data Analysis

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher collects texts (e.g., transcripts of interviews, notes on observations), isolates themes from the texts by examining the texts and reflecting on the content, then rewrites the theme “while interpreting the meaning of

the phenomenon or lived experience” (Sloan & Bowe, 2013, p. 1292) The findings will “usually appear as written phrases or statements that represent the meaning that a person . . . attributes to a related experience,” finding its essence (Sloan & Bowe, 2013, p. 1293). However, hermeneutic phenomenology is more concerned with relationships to context and less concerned with boiling things down to their essence than descriptive phenomenology (Sloan & Bowe, 2013).

To analyze my data, I followed the hermeneutic circle (Sloan & Bowe, 2013; van Manen, 1990):

- Step 1: Gather textual data.
- Step 2: Identify themes from each transcript by taking a holistic view of that transcript.
- Step3: Apply a selective approach, choosing key statements.
- Step 4: Rewrite these statements with interpretation written above/below.
- Step 5: Hermeneutic reductions from each transcript will emerge, allowing for writing of findings for each participant, and presenting the reductions as what/how this person experienced this phenomenon.

I then shared the reductions with the participant whose experience was being described, checking for accuracy and engaging the participants in co-creation of the description. I made final adjustments to the descriptions based on this co-creative review process.

These reductions and analysis can be found in Chapter 4. The emphasis in these reductions was on conveying a holistic understanding of the experiences of the participants.

I used the reductions and analysis of Chapter 4 to help surface themes of the experiences. These themes “are not objects or generalizations; metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (van Manen, 1990, p. 90). I used these themes, along with subthemes and the phenomenological *existentials* (theme types that guide reflection and analysis) to sort and prioritize experiential statements above opinion and other types of comment. The existential types of human experience, used as a priori codes for useful statements, are as follows (Sloan & Bowe, 2013; van Manen, 1990):

- Lived space—Spatiality
- Lived body—Corporeality
- Lived time—Temporality
- Lived human relation—Relationality

I then engaged in a dialog between collected texts (from interviews and observations, reductions, and existing literature about the phenomenon under study) in order to make the aspects of the experience explicit, “rather than using theory as a scaffolding for building an interpretive structure, phenomenology uses theory as a foil for examining what [theory] glosses” (van Manen, 2014, p66). Chapters 5 through 8 engage in this dialog between experience and theory.

Chapter 9 brings differences in experience between participants into focus, suggesting possible areas for improved understanding and more effective practice, as well as suggesting future areas of research. As the final hope for this study is to help those

who experience creative gifted underachievement, I will share the results with the school and district community, and I will make recommendations for future actions.

Role of the Researcher

One of the precepts of descriptive (traditional) phenomenology is that researchers must attempt to set aside (or bracket) their knowledge in order to keep it from biasing observations and the themes pulled from data, to the extent that this is possible (Criswell, 2013; Kaufer & Chamero, 2015). For this reason, phenomenological research must explain and use the basic assumptions of phenomenology as the basis for gathering knowledge, while researchers try to keep their own knowledge (including known scholarly theory) from affecting the research process (Criswell, 2013).

Heidegger's development of hermeneutic phenomenology does not support the idea that the observer can truly achieve an objective point of view, completely bracketing away one's own experience (Kaufer & Chamero, 2015; Sloan & Bowe, 2013). The end product of this type of research is not an explanation or analysis, rather, it is the researcher's personal reflection that allows for description of the phenomenon (Criswell, 2013; Sloan & Bowe, 2013). It is retrospective (Sloan & Bowe, 2013). Hermeneutic phenomenology is interpretive, so reflexivity (in particular, the use of empathy or prior experience to help with interpretation of meaning) is appropriate if it informs interpretation (Sloan & Bowe, 2013). Use of my own background, prior knowledge, and experiences is allowed if the study participant and I have these experiences in common (Sloan & Bowe, 2013). Therefore, I have also reflected on my experiences and have created texts (such as the introduction in Chapter 1), then gathered data (keeping possible

bias from these in mind), and, based on the combination of the two, decided which experiences and prior knowledge are appropriate to apply, and which are irrelevant.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MULTIFACETED VIEW

To help understand participant experiences, I will be placing them in a metaphoric framework: photography. At first, when scouting a new subject or location to photograph, I will take a series of snapshots from different points of view. This helps to give me an overview and an intuitive understanding of my subject that will allow for further exploration.

In Chapter 4, I will present a series of anecdotes showing snapshots of participant experience. Each participant has a specific point of view, as does any snapshot. These anecdotes will begin to give a feeling for the point of view of each participant. The study includes three sets of participants: teachers, parents, and students. The anecdotes I have chosen reflect experiences that are somewhat common within each group, so though we may be looking through Otto's eyes (for instance), Finn has probably had similar experiences. Looking at these snapshots grouped in this way helps to reveal underlying themes for each set of participants.

Four major themes evolved from these snapshots: creativity, motivation, sense of self, and power. Continuing the photography metaphor, the themes can be likened to camera lenses. Any specific lens on a camera will help to view the world in a certain way, focusing attention on some aspect of the view, while de-emphasizing others. These themes will function in the same way, taking a complex and interwoven experience and

helping to focus on a specific aspect of that experience for greater scrutiny. Each “lens” will have its own chapter.

A photographer may focus attention using not only different lenses, but different filters on these lenses. Each of what van Manen calls the phenomenological “existentials” (1990, p. 101) will provide a different filter for each lens: temporal experience, spatial experience, embodied experience, and relational experience. Each of these filters will further focus attention, helping to tease apart the experiences under study.

By using initial snapshots from different points of view, and the lenses of creativity, motivation, sense of self, and power, filtered through time, space, body, and relationships, I will build a multifaceted explication of the experience of the underachievement of creatively gifted students.

Snapshots

I chose to use a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived experience of creatively gifted underachieving high school students. Six students (three male and three female) and their families were identified by the students’ parents and volunteered to participate in this study. Participation involved two interviews of the students (the first ranging from 23 to 65 minutes, with most falling between 40 and 60 minutes; the second ranging between 15 and 25 minutes), an examination of their creative artifacts/activities, and one interview of the parent or parents (interviews with one parent present ranged from 37-47 minutes in length, those with both parents present ranged from 79-94 minutes). Six teachers from the school were also involved in study. Each of these volunteers allowed me to observe a single 88-minute class and conduct a follow-up

interview (ranging in length from 22-49 minutes long). I then reviewed the gathered information to write anecdotes and interpretations for each participant.

All participants had the opportunity to review the writing (anecdotes and interpretations) to ensure that it was an accurate description of their lived experiences. The students did this in person, though a few decided to take the writing home for further review and gave me input online afterward. All adult participants opted to review the writing online, though a few stopped by to see me to discuss it as well. All input from these co-creative interactions was incorporated into the final writing, and, in the case of major revisions, was reviewed by the participants a second time.

Hermeneutic phenomenology involves the writing of reductions, which attempt to compact themes revealed in data collection through the writing of anecdotes, snapshots of experiences. These anecdotes attempt to “offer us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). Rather than presenting all the experiences for each participant, the snapshots for each participant will highlight the experiences (common to most or all participants) that were most vivid for that participant. For instance, while most participants struggled with perfectionism, Otto’s experience of this was the most vivid, so this anecdote appears in his section. These anecdotes are the distillation of related experiences from various participants, rather than the literal telling of specific events in individual experiences of the individual participants (as in a case study). In this way, “an anecdote is rather like a poetic narrative which describes a universal truth” (van Manen, 1990, p. 119).

Following each anecdote, I will discuss the implications of the anecdote in ways to help deepen the experience as well as help show what the essential elements defining that experience are. This will help fill out the picture of the life experience of creative underachievement in high school, with “language that authentically speaks the world rather than abstractly speaking of it” (van Manen, 1990, p. 13). Participants reviewed and approved these discussion sections as well, helping ensure that they were in line with participant experience.

I wanted to make sure that the emphasis in the study is on the student experiences. Teachers and parents are both in a position of power relative to the student. Therefore, I wanted to amplify the student voices, so they could be heard. It is often the judgments of adults that dictate the limits to student power and choice, and to better understand what is going on in creative underachievement, these judgments must be subject to challenge from the student viewpoint. Adult interpretation of an experience cannot be allowed to speak for the student. Therefore, teacher and parent experiences will be explored from the standpoint that they are interactive parts of the students’ experience, part of their context. The student both affects and is affected by the experiences and judgements of both teachers and parents. For this reason, I will explore these questions in the following order: teacher experience, parent experience, and, getting the last word, student experience.

Teachers

All of the following anecdotes and the discussions after each are based directly on teacher interviews, observations of their classes, and co-creative discussions that took

place after I shared the initial writing with each study participant. Each teacher agreed that his or her section—both anecdote and discussion—was an accurate reflection of his or her experience.

Nadia Hook. Nadia is a tenth-grade biology teacher at the study site. She teaches both Accommodations Biology and tenth-grade Biology.

***Anecdote 1: NH.** Nadia Hook looked over the power point again. It was about genetic mutation. She found that adding a plot, characters, and a sense of mystery to the main questions in a chapter added interest, for her, if not always for the students. Sometimes, for them, the attempts at humor fell flat. But Nadia persisted. She liked her sentient lab mouse character manipulating a fly's DNA, and the RNA character that came in later. She hoped that they would make the content more memorable, and that the humor would create a sense of connection between her and her students. She enjoyed using her creativity as she made her lessons.*

She wished that she could allow the students more creativity in their classroom activities. She did what she could, ensuring that they had the opportunity to design a cover page for each unit, make mind maps of what they learned, and use color throughout their science notebooks, even having them use recycled materials to create models, but it was difficult to manage. The lessons often ended up more structured than she wanted them to be, so that even something as creative as a science experiment, where anything could happen, had to be taught step by step, each step dictated to give the expected—"correct"—outcome. They simply did not have enough time to give them the background knowledge to design their own experiments, see them confirm or disprove a hypothesis, analyze why, and perhaps try again. Instead, she gave them diagrams and colored pencils, with each cell part receiving a specific dictated color with no student choice involved at all. Sometimes, she understood why so many of them just viewed the class as a credit to get through. It made her feel tired.

Nadia makes a concerted effort to incorporate creativity into her science classes. For her, the scientific process is creative, and she hopes to bring some of this perception to her students. She uses humor as a component of creativity and hopes that the use of humor and story-telling will boost students' (and her own) interest and help them to remember content. She knows her humor will be viewed as "dumb" by her students, but

incorporating it anyway shows a willingness to be vulnerable and take risks. In doing this, she is modeling behaviors and attitudes necessary for creativity (Sternberg, 2012).

Her desire to incorporate creativity into her teaching encounters several obstacles. She understands that to be creative, students need a certain amount of knowledge in the domain (Amabile et al., 1996; Sternberg, 2012). She has found that gaining understanding of content through exploration and risk taking is more time consuming than knowledge gained through direct instruction, reading, or other forms of learning that present science as information already known, understood, and accepted by the field. This understanding has led to convergent teaching, the teaching of one correct answer, rather than mimicking the exploratory nature of true scientific inquiry. She has seen students gain a low-level factual knowledge of her subject (at least for a short period of time) without gaining a true appreciation for the risk and fail nature of experimentation.

One impetus behind this rush for content knowledge over process understanding has been a lack of time. The content to be covered in a specific class within a single school year is determined by state standards and by her department, which also has made certain decisions about not only what needs to be taught, but how to teach it. Certain teaching tools, such as scientific notebooks, have gone in and out of style within the department depending on the staff. Nadia's level of control and choice in what and how she teaches has been limited, and she has not always agreed with the priorities that are set for her classes.

Nadia believes that creativity can be a motivating force for students. She knows that most students in her classes are there because it is a required credit for graduation,

not because of personal interest in the subject (those who have a strong interest in her subject have likely chosen to take the higher level of the class). She incorporates the types of creativity that she feels she has time for, which will still promote basic levels of memory and understanding in her students. She uses color and visual imagery, as well as some higher-level thinking activities such as mind maps and timelines to synthesize information. Most often, however, her attempts to incorporate creativity end up as regimented methods that make use of artistic materials and activities (coloring diagrams, cutting out and pasting images—following specific, predetermined directions on how these will be done) without actual creative thought. “Hands on” and “creative” become falsely conflated. The conflict between what Nadia aspires to achieve and what she is able to do in the classroom drain her energy. She tries to make a creativity-friendly classroom but finds there are too many obstacles to accomplish this goal.

***Anecdote 2: NH.** Nadia Hooke sat at her desk, looking at the pile of worksheets she had just graded, and felt discouraged. Jennifer’s paper had matched Kaylie’s word for word. Not surprising, considering she was pretty sure she had seen Jen copying Kaylie’s work (with Kaylie’s permission) during the lab last class. And those two weren’t the only ones. It seemed like the students just didn’t get that that was cheating, or that the idea of cheating didn’t matter to them. What does it matter if I get it from the book or from my friends? they seemed to think. I finished the worksheet. They wanted the completion points, not the understanding that these points were supposed to reflect. Students were even taking pictures of the tests and sending them to other students on their phones.*

Biology was a required course for graduation, and Nadia knew that many (most, if she was honest with herself) of the students in her classes were there for the credit, not out of personal interest or curiosity. Still, that didn’t justify cheating. It was a Sisyphean task drawing their attention in and getting them to realize that doing the work themselves made it more meaningful, interesting, and easier to learn. Even, perhaps especially, her high achievers seemed to take the easy route, the cheating route, if they thought it would improve their grades. They cared more about their grades than their understanding. And what kind of system

were they working in where the grades and the understanding might not correspond?

She put the graded work into a folder and opened her planner. Here was the other problem. The students were barely beginning to grasp the contents of this chapter, and they were already supposed to be moving on to the next in two days. The state standards and the department both mandated that the class cover a huge expanse of material. With so much material to cover, no wonder the students did the minimum for the grade. It was the only way to make it through. There was no chance to gain a deep understanding at this pace, anyway. They would be lucky to remember any of it in five years. Homework wasn't really an option for expanding understanding through more time engaged with the materials, as the completion rate was so poor (and the cheating rate even higher). They were so busy these days with activities and work that homework became the lowest priority.

She made a few changes in the planner and opened one of the PowerPoint presentations for the next unit, trying to put in a little review of the finished chapter and emphasis on how the material from the new chapter tied into the old. If she could tighten it up just a bit, perhaps that would buy some more time.

Nadia experiences the underachievement of her students on a regular basis. She sees it when they copy each other's work and turn it in as their own, when they cheat on tests, and when they focus on grades instead of learning. She is fighting the fight for learning on several fronts.

Her first obstacle is that her classes are required to graduate but are not targeted to those interested in her subject. The school offers three levels of Biology: AP Bio, Biology, and Accommodations Biology (which is targeted to those students with special needs and those who are low achieving, so that they will have a smaller class and a paraprofessional to help). Those most interested in a career in science, or Biology specifically, along with those students who are the school's high achievers, are likely to take AP Bio. Though she does have a few students in her Biology and her Accommodations Biology classes who are genuinely interested in her class, most have

little interest in it beyond the credit it offers. It is up to her, therefore, to spark their interest and help generate the missing motivation.

Sparking interest in a student takes time—the time to build personal relationships; time to individualize curriculum by making the content relevant by tying it in to student interests, which in a class of 30 can be extremely diverse; and time to convince students that they can be successful at the learning tasks presented. Here is her second obstacle. She has a large amount of content to convey in a limited time frame with large classes. The time it takes to build personal relationships increases with each student added to the roster. Individualization is likewise impacted by class size, as well as by quantity of material delivered. She struggles with how to meet each student's needs when she has no time to give extra help and time when needed, because the systems in place prioritize quantity over quality. This undermines students' beliefs that they can accomplish tasks well and without taking shortcuts. Once the class becomes about jumping hoops for credit, the intrinsic motivation in the process of learning goes away as students know they are only learning the material for the short term, and they will never remember it or use it in the long term. This causes Nadia to question the curriculum itself, and this questioning may come across to the kids, further undermining their motivation.

Finally, she is faced with the dilemma of a changing set of skills and values among the students who enter her classroom. If she is to convince them to complete their work without cheating, she must teach soft skills, such as study habits, academic integrity, prioritization, self-advocacy, and time management.

The small fixes Nadia attempts within her current system—adding hands on activities, reducing homework, spiraling and connecting the curriculum from unit to unit—don't address the problems in curricular focus that compound underachieving behaviors. She may want to teach the things that students will use throughout their lives, in Biology and beyond it, skills such as critical questioning and thinking, gathering of evidence, testing of hypotheses, integrity, self-advocacy, time management, and learning for its own sake and for the sake of being an informed citizen. However, the curriculum and standards cause her to choose minute content over habits of thought, hoping that when the memory of specific content recedes, the habits of thought will have gotten in there somehow and will survive the forgetting.

Samantha Johnson. Samantha Johnson teaches ninth-grade Everyday Algebra, a class designed for student working significantly below grade level.

***Anecdote 3: SJ.** Samantha Johnson's classroom was fairly typical for her building, with brick walls and small clerestory windows along the outside wall. The day's agenda and warm up questions were projected on the board, along with some specific instructions:*

- 1. Please sit in your assigned seats.*
- 2. Please get your binder and a calculator.*
- 3. Explain three different ways to make three equal twelve (ex. $15 - 3 = 12$).*
- 4. Explain three different ways to make one equal nine.*
- 5. Explain three different ways to make nine equal four.*

This was her Everyday Algebra class (meaning it met twice as often as other math classes in the high school's rotating block schedule and counted for one math and one study hall credit). Most of the students in the class had learning disabilities, and their average level of math comprehension was at about the fourth-grade level. Many had confidence issues about math, as well as low organizational skills and high levels of distractibility. Yet they were comfortable in this room, both with each other and with Samantha.

They had been in the room working on the warm up for 5 minutes and were about done. "I was very impressed with some of the creativity I saw,"

Samantha stated, bringing their attention back to her. “You may volunteer an equation to answer any one of them.” She had a bag with popsicle sticks, each of which had a student name on it, and drew names from the bag one by one. At first, the students called on volunteered answers with one operation, and Samantha gave the few students who had incorrect answers gentle guidance and plenty of wait time to get something that worked. As they moved forward, the equations became more elaborate, involving multiple operations and steps, which allowed for review of concepts like order of operations. Every student whose name was drawn was expected to volunteer an answer and Samantha wrote all the answers provided on the board next to their prompts

After she had gathered enough answers for students to start seeing patterns, Samantha directed a group discussion, helping them see that an infinite set of correct answers are available with only one parameter, then moving them forward to begin to grasp that for two parameters, only one equation will work, the concept of function building, which they will be practicing next in pre-assigned groups. While she liked this curriculum’s emphasis on creative and critical thinking, she did not like its push toward group grading and instead only used group work for practice and concept reinforcement. This was a point of disagreement between her and her department, but she felt that she could get a better sense of what individual students knew and what they needed if they were held individually accountable. That way, she could tailor her instruction to strengths and weaknesses. She walked around the room, giving occasional guidance and figuring out what concepts she would have to reinforce next class or with the five homework problems she would assign today for completion by the end of the week.

Samantha’s classroom is a mixture of structure and divergent thinking. The structure focuses on soft skills, things like organization, sequencing of activities, and equal participation. Divergent thinking skills are used to teach content. Students are given time to explore multiple solutions and encouraged to do so. The warm up questions posed have no single correct answer, but instead, students are required to come up with many. All students are required to participate (as ensured by the names on popsicle sticks drawn out of a bag). Wait time helps students feel safe sharing answers, and when in difficulty they are given encouragement and direction that does not feel like correction. The atmosphere is positive and helps students feel safe taking risks. By having students write

each other's equations in their notebooks, Samantha reinforces listening and raises the value of student input to the level of something worth remembering. In a subject that is often viewed by students and parents as one of the most convergent, she finds time to teach it in a divergent, exploratory way, boosting student understanding and sense of ownership. Students feel creative in math class.

Samantha uses group work with specific goals in mind. The students have an opportunity to develop and deepen understanding of concepts through small group discussion. She resisted the move in her department toward group grading, and only uses groups for working with concepts. This allows her to assess students individually and thus to individualize instruction. This individualization is also made possible by a small class size, an instructional paraprofessional who divides the work load, and by the extended hours of the class, which meets twice as often as the other math classes taught at the school. This all helps Samantha build strong relationships with her students, which also helps their confidence and ability to take risks. These relationships and the strong understanding that Samantha gains through observation of their group work allows Samantha to limit the number of homework problems, specifically targeting them to review, reinforce, or preview content as needed by students. The limited number of problems and the flexibility of their completion schedule (assigned at the beginning of the week and due by the end, rather than due the following class period) allows students greater control over their homework schedules and (Samantha hopes) increases the likelihood that they will be able to complete assignments.

Samantha faces similar obstacles to creativity and motivation that Nadia faces. Her students are behind or far behind their age peers in understanding. She is attempting to cover a huge amount of curriculum to get them close to their peers, as Everyday Algebra is only offered in ninth grade. While there is a remedial track offered for 10th-12th graders, these classes do not offer the extra class time that is part of the Everyday Algebra classes. Samantha works hard so that her students can move to a grade-level track and out of remedial math by the end of freshman year. This challenge is mitigated by the additional time she has with these students, and this time also helps her have a better chance to build relationships and student confidence.

Math is often seen as a subject that one is either good at or not, and so students often feel little sense of control in their learning. The students in this class have not been successful in their previous math classes, or they wouldn't be in this one. Most have learning disabilities. Their engagement level stays high, however, and they are willing to participate, risking their ideas in front of their classmates. The focus of the class is building an understanding of math and mathematical reasoning, not on the memorization of facts and formulas. The students learn that this is a sense-filled, not senseless, activity, and one in which they have agency. They can use their own powers of reasoning to figure it out. Students are able to find multiple roads to success, rather than a single road that, once missed, cannot be found again and searching for it is useless.

This stands in stark contrast to what is happening in Nadia's classes, where the overall way of thinking scientifically gets lost in a sea of right and wrong facts generated

by previous scientists, whose delivered wisdom must be learned and demonstrated at a breakneck pace, with no time for students to internalize and own the process.

Cody Slade. Cody Slade teaches Human Geography, the most common social studies class taken in ninth grade, and AP Human Geography, taken by advanced and ambitious students who feel ready (or whose parents believe they are ready) for a college-level class as a freshman.

***Anecdote 4: CS.** Cody Slade's third period class was AP Human Geography. The class had a sluggish start, a combination of food coma and after vacation lethargy. This was their first day back after Thanksgiving, but as they engaged in the warm-up, refreshing their memories and working with the material, they became livelier. A few, who could sometimes be trouble makers if they were bored, had even begun a spirited debate about a country's responsibility to provide opportunities to its citizens. Cody knew that they had benefitted from the example set by the highly motivated, high-achieving students who gravitated to this level of class, even as he regretted what it had done to the other ninth grade social studies classes. This class seemed to sap all the motivated, organized students away from most of those who could really use their example and energy.*

When the warm-up was finished, Cody projected the day's assignment on the board: each student was to write a newspaper article using several online and hard copy resources provided. Each article needed a title, background information, two to three paragraphs about life in Mexico City, a conclusion, and cited photographs. It should also use three to four terms from the worksheet they had reviewed at the beginning of class, share the results of at least two surveys, and be free of grammar and spelling mistakes. Cody also instructed the students to "be creative. I will be grading 120 of these."

AP Human Geography is the highest level social studies class offered to ninth graders at this school. Students with high educational goals and motivation gravitate to these classes. Cody and some other teacher participants see this as a negative, feeling that it places students into tracks, separating those who could provide energy and positive examples of study skills to others into one place, and leaving the other students without a model. Cody sees this tracking as tied to teacher-pleasing behaviors, goal setting, and

organization, not necessarily intelligence or needed level of challenge. This means that the possible benefits to students like his now-engaged “class clown” and others, who might disengage if taught at a slower pace or lower level, are not a big part of his judgement about how these courses should be offered. He firmly believes that if AP classes are offered, they should be in addition to, not instead of, regular classes.

(Currently, students choose one level or another, and generally don’t take both.)

However, he sees that the only way to realistically untrack students and put all levels together—placing motivated with unmotivated, organized with disorganized—would be to drastically reduce class size so that challenge level could be differentiated within a single class, and strong relationships could be built between teacher and student. As long as classes include 30 or more students, he just doesn’t see how this could be possible.

Cody finds himself creating many hoops for the students to jump through. These requirements give students a clear understanding of expectations. However, little discussion of what they are to get from the assignment, in terms of understanding or personal relevance, occurs. Personal relevance is created during the discussion before the assignment, but no overt emphasis is placed on bringing this personal connection to bear on the news article. It is clear that the assignment is designed to help students understand and apply the content they have been learning, but the assignment is presented as a series of concrete requirements, not a level of understanding desired. Cody questions whether most students reach a level of understanding, synthesis of information, cross application of content outside the classroom, and personal connection, or whether schools teach them instead to jump through hoops. Other teachers also see a school focus on grades and

requirements rather than on understanding. A wide-spread belief amongst the participating teachers is that the emphasis on hoop jumping focuses school on the extrinsic rewards of grades and pleasing the teacher, while losing sight of the importance and intrinsic motivation in learning for its own sake. Like Nadia, Cody feels pressure to cover a large amount of content, which limits time and depth. A culture that values grades over learning results, leading to a pattern of taught underachievement including high motivation to cheat and poor motivation amongst students who don't care about their grades. The removal of highly motivated students from their age peers compounds this effect, so that the chance for low-achieving students to find motivation from friends is lowered.

Rodger Starbucks. Roger Starbucks teaches all the band classes at the site. He also directs the after-school marching band.

***Anecdote 5: RS.** Rodger Starbucks stood on the conductor's platform and asked the students to clean up the back area of the band room, which they had littered with backpacks and instrument cases as they came in. The kids complied quickly and got their music out on their own, guided by the rehearsal order written on the board. Roger believed in taking care of the little things as a foundation for bigger things, teaching the students to clean up after themselves, be on time (or early), use time well (like tuning throughout the warm-up), and understand how the work (or lack thereof) of one person could affect the quality of the whole group. These were the real-world skills that students took from this room which could help them through their whole lives, even if they never played an instrument again.*

How students performed on these "soft skills" directly affected the "hard skills" of the curricular content and standards. He saw it every day. As he took the group through their chord warm-ups, he kept an ear out for the fifth chair trumpet player. He wasn't following as well as he should, and his breath support was bad. He had scraped into the top band during auditions, but he was often absent, and didn't spend enough time practicing at home. He would probably end up in the mid-level band next year. The second chair trumpet, on the other hand, had managed to move up three chair positions this year and was showing true musicality in her playing. Her work was paying off.

Then there was his first chair trumpet. He never seemed to leave the band room, coming in to practice before school and at lunch, even occasionally ditching other classes to be here when he knew Rodger had a plan period, so the room would be available. Rodger had talked to him about the ditching, but he also believed that it was part of the self-sorting students did to find out what they were passionate about and what they would do with their lives. He didn't really agree with the high emphasis that the school placed on AP and other high-level classes, convincing students that the only way to get to college was to work on college-level classes here in high school. They needed time to be high schoolers first and to fumble around trying to figure out who they were and what they wanted. Colleges accepted almost anyone these days. They might not get a scholarship, but if they got even a 2.5 GPA, they could get in. Instead, they scrambled around, jumping through hoops and completely stressed about their grades instead of figuring out who they were, what they wanted, and how to get to a job on time and prepared.

In band, if students wanted to play an instrument as a hobby, they could stay in the bottom level band all four years of high school and devote their passion to robotics or something. If this was their passion, they would find themselves spending all of their time on music, would get to the point where they reached the top band, and even first chair of their section. That level of musicality only happened once the foundations were in place, both technical skills and self-discipline. But the self-discipline was a major part of it.

Students needed the option to go into shop or other preparation programs for trade jobs here at the high school, without being seen as failures. But, an all or nothing attitude about achievement seemed to happen here. He didn't think that was good. What students needed to learn was how to be reliable and disciplined. Sometimes he worried that what they were learning was how to please a teacher and take a test. How would that help them once they had graduated?

Rodger has a clear sense that high school is a place where student choices control student outcomes and where teachers have influence, but not control. He sees a clear hierarchy of skills. So-called "soft skills" underpin everything else. He deliberately teaches his students skills such as showing up on time, cleaning up after oneself, efficient use of time, and being a reliable, responsible member of a team. He sees how these behaviors affect all areas of endeavor, and that without them, little else can be

accomplished. While the students may need reminders about what these behaviors look like (as when he asked them to clean up the back of the classroom), he believes that taking the time to teach these skills is worthwhile, and that students will eventually internalize these skills. Part of the internalization of these skills is the natural consequences that follow from failing to use them, such as doing poorly in a chair audition due to lack of practice, moving down within a section to a position that will have a less rigorous part, and so impact the group less by not practicing.

After soft skills come basic subject matter skills: how to play one's instrument, read rhythm and notes, and eventually understand aspects of music theory. These skills require constant maintenance with practice and review and are the foundation of all that follows. He knows that without a love of this maintenance process, students will likely decide to place their energies in other areas and will self-sort into lower levels of his subject or drop it entirely. He does not play games or change delivery format to help entice students to become more motivated in this area. He relies on the fact that practice works, that people generally enjoy the feeling of improving and mastering a skill, and that the aesthetic (and possible social) appeal of his subject matter will motivate students.

This reliance is a luxury that core class teachers don't have. Although students need a certain number of elective credits to graduate and even a fine art credit, these do not need to come from band. A large array of options fulfill these requirements. So, if students don't feel that band is a good fit, they can drop it with little consequence. Students know they must get all the way through Biology. This pressure sets up a

different power dynamic and sense of urgency—even desperation—in the core classes that is not present in electives.

Only after band students have basic subject skill proficiency can they begin to explore the next level in the skill hierarchy: musicianship. Musicianship is where a player begins to move from getting notes and techniques right to getting emotion and style into the music played. Individual musicians develop musicianship, but part of musicianship is also learning to listen to others and respond to their expressiveness. In an ensemble like a band, it is very important to sort by skill so that those who are still working on basic skills can work on these skills with their skill peers, on music which is appropriate for this, while those who are working toward musicianship are not held back by those still learning their notes and can, instead, work together to be responsive to the ensemble.

Not everyone will work hard enough, be interested enough, listen to enough expert players, and understand enough of what they hear to reach a level of musicianship in high school, but this doesn't mean they should not be able to play. The sorting that takes place through the audition process, which filters students by exposing in their final performance their motivation, work ethic, knowledge, and current skill level, allows students to pursue their interests at a level commensurate with their interest and dedication.

Robert believes that one of the main purposes of high school is to allow students to explore who they are and to find and prioritize their interests. The filtered open system of audition for band placement allows students a certain level of autonomy in choosing not only whether or not to engage in this subject, but also to choose their level of

commitment and challenge, based on motivation, goals, and skills. This ideal is reflected in his wider view of the school's culture. He perceives a social hierarchy in the classes offered, and a social stigma attached to class choices. To him, the school overemphasizes the importance of AP, Dual Credit, and other high-level academic classes, to the point where students and parents seem to believe that, if they want to get into college at all, students must take—or even ace—these courses, something he believes to be completely false. This emphasis on high-level academics causes the school to emphasize packed subject content over life skills like being on time, using time well, and the other soft skills he considers a groundwork for a successful life. In addition, vocational classes, which are often very good at teaching these skills, and which suit many student interests, learning styles and needs, are viewed as second class.

All of this together—lack of soft skill instruction (to the point where natural consequences for low soft skills, such as not getting assignments in on time, are mitigated by extensions and other teacher accommodations), overemphasis on high-level academics, and a class system of subject matter—makes Robert worry that students leave high school unprepared for work or further schooling. He would rather see them have more freedom to find out who they are and what they are good at, instead of trying to prove that they meet a single ideal of the well-educated and high-achieving high school student. For him, if a student is underachieving, he will give support, but he will also respect that it is a choice. Not everyone can be good at everything. If they choose not to be good at playing an instrument, that is OK. If they choose to skip the occasional math class to spend more time practicing trumpet, that is OK, too. It is a reflection of who they

are and an indicator of the direction they will likely go in the future. Different paths are needed for the world and society to function.

Helen Lesterman. Helen Lesterman teaches a variety of English courses at the site, including Advanced tenth grade English and Mythology, an English elective.

***Anecdote 6: HL.** Helen Lesterman reread the email. “Mrs. Lesterman, I just saw that my grade has dropped to a B. I need to fix this immediately. Is there anything I can do to bring my grade up? Thanks! Stacey.” Finish the reading when it is assigned, Helen thought at her screen. But she knew her answer would have to be more diplomatic when she actually gave it.*

She had given them time to read in class, but many hadn’t completed the reading. Her expectation used to be that if they didn’t finish it in class, they would finish it at home. This was no longer her expectation. She had seen too many times the evidence of attempted short-cuts: using “Smart Notes,” Google, or various other digital versions of Cliffs Notes, which gave them the illusion that they had all of the information, experience, and learning that they needed, but which ended up giving them little to no substance.

Shortcut thinking came out, too, in the questions that some of them asked. “How long does this paragraph have to be? How many sentences in a paragraph?” as though there were one correct answer to that question. Revising seemed to be about getting an A, not about becoming a better writer, or because “I think I can do better.” With Infinite Campus giving students their grades the moment they were entered, the grade seemed to be everything, and learning was nothing, particularly in her advanced level classes.

Perhaps, if she were sure that the grades truly reflected the level of learning, she would feel better about it. But, whether she used rubrics or tests for grading, projects or five-paragraph essays as assignments, she wasn’t confident that the grades really reflected student understanding and ability. So much just reflected whether the work was completed, which really had nothing to do with understanding, or at least, it might not.

One of the things she had tried that she found worked well was something she was philosophically opposed to, as it was really just a completion grade. It was a creative writing piece she had assigned. If students followed her parameters, they were guaranteed 50/50 points. Students wrote and submitted a draft. Helen gave feedback. Students revised. This happened an indefinite number of cycles within a certain period, until the student demonstrated proficiency or marked improvement. At the end of the period, students turned in what they had, and if they didn’t show improvement or proficiency, Helen just used a six-traits

writing rubric, and they got the grade they got. She was amazed at the results. She surveyed the students after the assignment, and most of them liked the grading system. Some, she was sure, just liked the almost guaranteed 50 points. But she remembered one student who asked if they could do it again, because she thought it took away the pressure of the grade and just let her focus on her writing.

Here was the problem, then. If students were focused on the grade, they were not focused on learning. The grade was not a learning tool but a distraction. Also, a disconnect occurred between grading systems, standards, and grade expectations. In the traditional A-F grading system, a C was considered average. In the standards, 80% of students were expected to reach proficient. Did that mean that proficient was a C, a B, or an A? Students in many classes (and their parents) felt that, if they completed all their work, that should result in an A. But Helen thought that an A was special, a designation that should be reserved for those who were truly good at reading and writing, so that the grade reflected understanding and achievement, not work completion.

The whole thing felt as though this creative, divergent thing, writing, were being taught in convergent ways, so that students didn't see it as creative, didn't understand that there were many right ways to achieve one's goal (storytelling, persuasion, or explanation), and that it was a skill that required constant work for improvement. Instead, students wanted to check the boxes, get "the right answer," and be done.

Helen looked at the email again. She began her reply, "Dear Stacey, Thanks for checking up on your grade. . . ."

Helen feels ambiguous about the computer program Infinite Campus (IC), and the requirement that grades be posted at least once a week. She has noticed that students are now reactive, taking action after a bad grade, rather than proactive, making sure to get work done when instructed. Her students believe that teachers will often be flexible, allowing them to re-do work, or turn it in late, both of which can create more work for the teacher. She wonders if the school is teaching students that there won't be negative consequences for failing to complete obligations.

Over time, she has lowered her expectations. She now finds that many students simply will not complete work outside of class, and sometimes choose to cheat to try and

get desired grades for less work. She sees the connection between work and learning eroding in her time as a teacher. This kind of shortcut is one of the main ways that she sees underachievement manifest in her classes, along with work that is simply incomplete or missing.

The questions her students sometimes ask indicate to her that students believe there is one right way to write. They are actively looking for boxes to check off to ensure a good grade, rather than looking for a way to learn writing as a skill to be practiced independently in real life, where clear communication and solid thinking are what is needed. No specific number of sentences or paragraphs can ensure this, only practice, learning, and considered thought.

She is unsure if her grades even reflect student ability. The high amount of incomplete work makes it almost impossible to see what they actually know, understand, and are able to do. This problem is compounded by the lack of clear consensus at the school about how subject standards align with the A-F grading system. Without consensus amongst the staff whether proficient means an A, B, or C, it becomes even harder to fight the hoop-jumping mentality that full completion of work should equate to an A. Though school policy and her syllabus at the beginning of the year state that a C is average and an A is exceptional, students and parents still feel that if a student does all that is required, he or she should receive an A.

The emphasis and confusion about grading make the A an uncertain and mercurial goal, something that students want but are not sure how to achieve. This compounds their search for hoops to jump through to please the teacher, and their hypervigilance on IC.

The grade, rather than being a reflection of learning or a motivator to do good work, becomes, instead, a distraction.

When Helen tried to remove the distraction by giving a guaranteed 50/50 in her revisions assignment, it worked. Students focused on their own individualized growth, rather than on micromanaged but nontargeted requirements. With a goal of improvement through practice and revision, teaching was individualized and much more successful. Yet, Helen felt bad about using this technique because she saw it as awarding completion points. She does not have a system for delineating grading for the process of practicing, for growth, and for quality of final product. This causes her to see this successful unit as a type of grading that doesn't reflect true student achievement, even though the learning was greater than with more conventional grading practices.

Helen finds that grades encourage students to see writing as a process with one correct answer (or one set of requirements that must be fulfilled to please the teacher) rather than a divergent process requiring constant practice for improvement. She is unsure what to do to change this. Bowing to her own perceived hoops, she reinforces the hypervigilance of her student in her emailed reply, following the school culture which encourages students to watch their grades carefully and regularly.

Faith Billings. Faith teaches family and consumer sciences, including several sections of a catering class and a class called Nutrition and Wellness.

***Anecdote 7: FB.** Faith Billings loved this field trip. It was when the learning came together, and students saw how it happened in the real world. They were on a career tour of Safeway, the culminating activity for the unit.*

The unit began with words on paper, an assignment for each group to design a food product, test it, and market it. At that point, it was just guidelines on

paper and didn't connect to students at all. But then she had them name their businesses, think about what they wanted to sell, and how they would sell it, and the fireworks began, boom, boom, boom, as ideas built on ideas, and they were off and running. Once they chose a food product, they researched similar recipes, tweaked them, then tried making them in the kitchen. Staff members were invited to taste and critique the food. The marketing was next, and finally, this tour.

As the tour continued, Faith could see that the students were really getting it. The tour guide was taking them around to the different departments and talking about the different skill sets that they would need for the different areas. Faith could see the student faces light up, eyes drinking in what they saw as they realized that all of stuff they were learning in the kitchen applied to this or that work station, and they pictured their products here, and how they would sell.

She knew that some of the students she had with her that day were not considered good students, but hers was one of the last classes that students failed. She didn't believe it was because her classes were easy. They weren't. Some of the students with ADHD should have been struggling all the time with the level of chaos and distraction any time the class was in the kitchen, but it just never happened that way.

In the bakery one student teased another, "See, they wear gloves when handling the cookies." This was a running joke since Terrance got in trouble for poking his group's cookies too much. It was a joke, but it showed that they were really starting to internalize the food safety instructions she had taught them. Mistakes were the best teachers.

Faith is a strong believer in the power of giving her students real-world experiences and showing them explicitly how the content she teaches is applied in jobs and at home. She understands that the immediate perception of school work is one of disconnect and unreality. The students don't see the reality of what they are being asked to do when it is presented as guidelines and requirements. It is when she introduces an aesthetic component—the creation of a business name—that interest, creativity, and a sense of reality and purpose kick in.

This sense of the real world and real consequences is woven throughout her lessons. When students invite their teachers to sample their product, everything about the

situation is immediate and real, not delayed and theoretical (like a grade in the gradebook). They are creating something real (food) that will be immediately used for its intended purpose (eaten) and judged on its merits. Students tend to invite teachers with whom they feel a connection to the taste test, so the opinion of these teachers matters, and they respect their input. They experience pride from creation, presentation, and reaction. Their work fulfills a purpose. As they visit the store, they are able to picture their own products being sold there, and for some, this may become a concrete goal.

The kitchen can be a chaotic place, and students who often underachieve due to issues of organization and even ADHD might be expected to have difficulty in such a distracting environment. However, the opposite seems to be the case. Students who regularly underachieve in other classes tend to do better in Faith's classes than elsewhere in school. She feels they may not be working entirely up to their potential, some still neglect to turn in work or miss deadlines, but they seem to do better for her than in other areas of school. She attributes this to the hands-on nature of her class, the level of physical activity, and the intrinsic motivation in the subject—what teen doesn't love food? She also knows that many of them have not learned how to cook from their parents and may be worried about how they will feed themselves when they are on their own. Her content is real for the students in many ways that other subjects simply aren't.

The team structure of the cooking experiences in the class (groups of four to five students work together to cook at each kitchen station) helps them by giving them support, social interaction, and accountability. They are allowed to make mistakes, and to

learn from them, and the team members help each other remember the learning. In the kitchen, experience is the best teacher.

Parental Experiences

While it can be tempting to view the context of underachievement exclusively as the school, it is not just a school-based phenomenon. Context includes place, people, and culture. The place of home, the important relationship with parents, and the way that a family creates its own culture are all relevant to the overall experience of underachieving, creatively gifted high school students (Rimm, 2003). The anecdotes and discussions in this section reflect the individual experiences of parent participants as expressed in their interviews and refined in co-creative discussions.

Abby's mom Hazel. Hazel teaches at a community college, operates a service helping people prepare their taxes, and sells jewelry on the side. Her daughter Abby is a senior this year.

***Anecdote 8: H.** “She is incredibly talented, but her grade doesn’t show it. I really would like to see her complete the project. She won’t get full credit, but at least she’ll get some credit, which should raise her to a passing grade again. Any support you can give would be greatly appreciated.”*

Hazel closed the email from Abby’s English teacher. That was nice of her, she thought. If I missed a due date in high school, that was it, I got a zero. Hazel wasn’t sure if this kind of flexibility was a good thing or a bad thing. She just knew that none of the kids today would have made it through the classes she had taken.

She had spoken to Abby about this project several times already, ever since she noticed the missing grade on Campus Portal, the interface for parents to view student grades on IC. Pretty much any time Abby asked her about anything, the response had become, “Have you finished that project yet?” “Mom, can I go see my friend?” “Have you finished that project yet?” “Mom, I’m taking the dogs for a walk.” “Have you finished that project yet?” “Mom, what’s for dinner?” “Have you finished that project yet?”

The answer was obviously, “No.”

Abby had actually been getting better about this kind of thing. Ever since she decided to go to that college—and had received the acceptance letter—she seemed to understand (finally!) that her grades had consequences. She needed to get scholarships to be able to go, and she was finding that her GPA was keeping her from being eligible for many of them. It was a bit late to turn them around much, but she was trying. She was starting to keep a planner, check Campus Portal on her own more often, and do her homework more. But this project kept eluding her attention.

Hazel went downstairs to the kitchen table where Abby was finishing her algebra homework. It was time for some consequences. Abby looked up as she came in.

“I just got an email from Mrs. Lesterman,” Hazel said. “She says you still haven’t turned in your project.”

“Oh, shoot!” Abby replied, surprised. “I completely forgot, again!”

“I know you are getting ready to go to Idaho for a college visit, but if you aren’t done by then, you aren’t going.”

Abby looked solemn. “I’ll get it done. I promise.”

“Don’t promise, do it.” Hazel sighed and sat down across from her daughter. “Abby, it doesn’t get any easier. High school is a breeze compared to everything else. It’s cake. I think you are starting to see that with the scholarship stuff, right?”

Abby nodded. She had a pile of paperwork for just that by her left elbow. She looked worried. “Real life” was just around the corner, and she was starting to see its shadow.

Abby got the project done and turned in at the end of that week.

Like most parent participants, Hazel has found herself in the unenviable position of being the nag. In order to help her daughter, she checks the online grade postings maintained by the school and reminds her daughter about missing work. She also feels obligated to impose negative consequences as an incentive when Abby forgets or neglects work, as the consequences of lower grades don’t have a motivating impact on Abby, or at least they haven’t until recently. Hazel hopes that imposing these more immediate,

negative consequences will help Abby's motivation, and may make future consequences more real. She also hopes to protect her somewhat from those future consequences by influencing her decisions and actions in such a way that her grades will improve.

Hazel feels ambiguous about how schools have changed. While she likes the discussion and hands-on learning that she sees at her daughter's school, she feels that things have gotten soft in terms of consequences, and she is not sure she likes that. On-line credit recovery options—which she believes don't teach as well as in-person classes—allow students to fail classes, then make up the credit without the unpleasant consequence of having to retake the class with younger students, a far more concrete and immediate consequence than not getting a scholarship in four years. While she has seen Abby's organization and achievement improve steadily since freshman year, it is only when Abby can see the consequences of her choices as real, immediate, and negative that she really starts to “get it.” Hazel thinks that high school is a bit late to be understanding this.

Part of being a parent is the tension that exists between wanting to protect one's child and letting the child learn from experience, especially from mistakes. With an underachiever, the mistakes may be writ large. The child may not take the lessons from mistakes that seem so obvious to the parent. The lessons the child may take from mistakes may be invisible to the parent, or incorrect in the parent's view. How parents choose to react when this happens is varied, but all the parent participants in this study have found themselves at one point or another limiting student choice, imposing negative consequences, and casting themselves in the role of the nag.

Steve's mom Elizabeth. Elizabeth works in marketing. She and her family moved to this district three years ago when Steve was entering middle school.

Anecdote 9: E. Elizabeth shut the door to her car and walked toward the house, already feeling her tension level rise. When she had called home at 3:45 to check in with Steve and see if he had fed the chickens, the answer had been inevitable. "No, but I was going to." She knew that in all likelihood he had done nothing of the sort until his father got home at 4:30 and reminded him again.

She walked in the house and set her purse on the side table. Her younger son was watching TV in the living room down the stairs of their split-level. Steve was not visible. I bet he is on his phone again, she thought. She walked up the stairs to his room and stuck her head in. Not phone this time—he was on his computer instead. She could tell from the screen it was one of the blogs that he followed—one with how-to videos, not school work.

"How you doing?" she asked.

"Fine," he replied, pausing the video, but not looking at her.

"Any homework?" She knew he had a test coming up in biology.

"Not tonight," he said, getting ready to restart the video.

She walked all the way into the room, feeling tired. They had done this so many times. Every day she checked his grades online. She had tried to get him to use a planner. The school had someone working with him to help him with organization and work completion, setting him up with folders for upcoming and completed work. None of it seemed to make a difference, but she had to keep trying.

"What about your biology test? Didn't I see you had a study guide for that?"

"I don't know," he said, still showing every intention of going back to the blog.

"Well, let's check," Elizabeth insisted. "Come on. Let's see if it is in your backpack."

Steve lifted his backpack onto his desk and unzipped the main pocket. A jumbled mess poured out: the organizational folders that hadn't been used in a month, several binders, a planner he had used once, and a pile of crumpled paper squashed under everything. Elizabeth began to unfold and flatten the papers. She vaguely remembered the study guide had been a teal blue color. She found something that might be it. The paper was crumpled to the point where it felt kind of soft, more like fabric, with dark smudge-marks on the folds. The staple had torn out of the corner, but she had both sheets, and they were still readable.

“Found it,” she said and looked at Steve. He was half-heartedly flipping through his math binder. She saw his biology binder in the pile. “Here, why don’t we put it in your bio folder?” He had a binder check coming up soon, she knew.

Steve became animated for the first time since she had entered the room. “No, don’t do that!” he said. “If you put it in the folder I will never be able to find it again!”

Elizabeth looked at the disheveled contents of his abused backpack. But we can’t find anything now, either. That was an argument for another time. “Well, you have the study guide now. Let’s see if you can get some work done on it.”

Having a creative underachieving student is not a comfortable experience. By definition, underachievement is a problem that persists over time. For Elizabeth, it now seems to be a persistent, unsolvable problem that creates tension, sadness, anger, and helplessness. Even thinking about the problem triggers these feelings. In particular, several parents refer to the feeling of having to “be their child’s brain,” and “working harder than they are.” This is part of the exhaustion. Elizabeth sees that Steve lacks organizational skills but has abilities in other areas. Lack of organization masks these other abilities. So, in an attempt to help her son, Elizabeth tries to fill in these gaps. She tries to give him various organizational systems and hopes that her questions and attention about missing or needed work will help him remember and prioritize what needs to be done. She cannot effectively use her own organizational systems on Steve’s work as she lacks sufficient information. She uses the resources provided by the school to make an educated guess about what needs to be done, but she often doesn’t find out about missing work or upcoming tests or projects until after the due date and subsequent hit to Steve’s grade.

Compounding the problem is Steve's reticence. He is not forthcoming with information about assignments, and it is unclear if his forgetting about assignments is accidental or deliberate. Elizabeth wonders if he is lying to her, to himself, or is genuinely forgetful when he asserts he has no homework. This resistance to help, whether accidental or deliberate, makes it even more difficult for her, but she is unable to stop trying. Part of this is her absolute love and care for her son. Part of it is an identification of self with the self of her son. This can be seen in her repeated use of the word "we" when referring to him, his actions, and his work. She has taken on this burden as her own and does not see a separation between the two of them in this struggle.

Elizabeth sees that Steve not only lacks organizational skills, he lacks motivation for school work. He would much rather spend time reading his blogs and watching how-to videos than work on studying for a test. She sees technology as one of his strengths—he is very good at math and science, particularly anything computer-related—but it ends up being a distraction. The appeal of technology and her control over it make it the obvious choice as a negative consequence for failure—incomplete work can lead to the denial of technology privileges, including his phone, games, and use of the computer for activities other than homework. However, this lever has not been terribly effective as a motivator, particularly when positive activities such as Robotics Club make her reluctant to take his phone privileges in case he needs to get hold of her for transportation.

Elizabeth is also bewildered by the entire situation. To her, his disorganization is obvious, and it would be easy for her to solve if it were her obligations and papers. However, Steve will not use the tools she has provided him, and, strangest of all, fights to

preserve his own “organization system” out of fear he will lose things if he follows her advice. He seems to believe that he has a functioning (or at least partially functioning) system and that using hers would confuse him. She can’t see any system, and he is already losing things.

The size and persistence of the problem are overwhelming, so she focuses on the immediate problem in front of her, attempting to motivate him and organize him for a specific assignment at a specific time. She has no time or energy left to try to see or address a larger picture. Nothing she has done along those lines in the past has helped. She is at the point of fighting only the battle in front of her.

Bella’s parents Gene and Katie. Gene is a civil engineer and has also designed and built a house for the family that is almost complete. Katie has taught elementary school and special education in middle school. Both are heavily involved in various creative endeavors from writing to instrument building.

Anecdote 10: G and K. Katie had her computer logged on to Campus Portal, checking Bella’s grades. They were dropping again as the semester progressed, and she was down to Ds and Fs in several classes at this point. Gene came to look over her shoulder.

Katie felt tired. Last week she had tried to show Bella the color-coded calendar techniques that she had used in school, explaining that she was disorganized, too, and that this had helped. Bella would have none of it. I couldn’t possibly understand, because I’m her mom, Katie thought.

Gene shook his head. “She is so smart,” he said. “She could be doing so much better than this if she would just decide to. I mean, I procrastinated in school, and only did what I needed to do to get through, but I could tell what needed doing and what I could let slide.”

“I reminded her about completing her math homework yesterday, and you know what she told me?” Katie asked. “She said, ‘I was going to, but now I won’t because you told me to.’ I don’t know what to do.”

Katie was frustrated with the school, too. Bella's test scores averaged a B, but every single piece of homework was graded, and Bella just didn't do them. She didn't need to in order to understand the content, so why should she have to do them? Just like when they dropped her down from advanced level language arts because they said she didn't work well in groups. What did that have to do with learning English? It was all part of the game, a game Bella didn't seem to know how to play.

"She doesn't have a sense of urgency," Gene said. "It's like she doesn't get it that what she is doing now will have consequences for her for the rest of her life. She doesn't care. It's not important to her."

They both got quiet, looking at the screen.

"She cares about her music," Gene said.

They talked it through for a while, reluctant to take away something that was so important to her, but in the end, they thought it was for the best. If she didn't raise her grades up to all Cs or better, they would not let her take jazz band next year. She could stay in her symphonic band class and in marching band after school, but not jazz. Maybe that would help her see that her choices had consequences and that doing well in school was important.

Gene and Katie have found that Bella is not always forthcoming about what is going on in school, and Campus Portal allows them to see for themselves information that she may have forgotten, neglected to tell them, or even outright lied about. The line between these three situations is difficult for them to discern. They know that Bella has genuine problems being organized and remembering her work, but they suspect there may be some deliberate forgetfulness as well. They have tried multiple strategies over several years to help with her organizational issues, but none of these strategies seems to work.

Katie tries to connect Bella's disorganization to her own, hoping that Bella will be more likely to adopt one of the strategies, and to help Bella feel less alone, inadequate, different, or overwhelmed. She hopes to show Bella that disorganization is not an

insurmountable obstacle, but Bella rebuffs these efforts. Katie experiences this separation as a normal and expected part of her daughter's adolescence. At the same time, it is painful to be shut out, feeling helpless to help her daughter. Bella won't keep track of her school obligations and won't let her parents do it for her. This makes them feel helpless and unsure how to react. They could let her fail, which could have lasting negative consequences for her, consequences they don't believe she fully appreciates. They could actively try to change her behavior, though they have tried many times before without success. Either way, the ultimate choice on what to do still lies with Bella

Both Gene and Katie are aware of the persistent gap between Bella's abilities and her grades. Some of this they attribute to disorganization and suspected ADHD inattentive type (this diagnosis was confirmed professionally late in the course of data-gathering). While Gene attributes this gap largely to a lack of motivation, sense of urgency, and decisiveness, Katie also sees contributing factors in the school system itself.

Gene viewed his own school as a means to an end that involved a bunch of hoops he needed to jump through in order to achieve his goals. He sees Bella's school in the same way. He goes back and forth between thinking that she will be fine if she can just get to college where the subjects will be more targeted to her interests, and thinking that she won't do well there because she lacks study skills and the ability to prioritize, including the ability to see something as important because it is required for the class, not for learning or future life. He sees similarities between Bella's behavior and his own at her age (procrastination and choosing not to do work) but sees Bella as more extreme as she doesn't see which hoops she needs to jump and which can be ignored. He is

bewildered by this difference and doesn't know what to do about it. Gene found that he was able to balance the learning he chose in and out of school with enough compliance to get what he wanted out of the school system (namely, his degree). He does not see this flexibility in his daughter or any real understanding on her part that compliance is a necessary part of the student/school exchange.

Katie has objections to several things that have happened with the school. She feels that students should be able to skip busywork or any practice that doesn't help their understanding. She also feels that Bella was treated unfairly when removed from an advanced level language arts class due, not to her level of ability or understanding, but rather to an apparent lack of ability to work in groups. She has a questioning attitude to the requirements placed on her daughter. Both Katie and Gene consider some of the work that Bella is asked to do to be unnecessary and part of a system that can penalize students unreasonably for noncompliance. Like many parents of underachievers, they have urged her to turn in incomplete or imperfect work for partial credit, emphasizing the importance of compliance, while acknowledging that such compliance may have nothing to do with learning.

Like most parents in this study, they make the choice to take away something the student likes or loves as a consequence of low grades. They attempt to motivate her and to give her a safe experience of negative consequences in the hopes this lesson will transfer to the larger picture, she will understand that she is making choices, and the ones she is currently choosing will result in fewer opportunities in the future.

Otto's parents Edward and Teri. Edward graduated from high school with no plans to attend college. Eventually, he joined the Marine Corp, where he ended up working in electronics and computer programming. He now works for a computer company, traveling regularly to do consulting work. Teri stayed at home raising her sons until Otto reached fourth grade, then went back to school, and now works in health information management at a local hospice.

Anecdote 11: E and T. Teri felt so tired. She had checked Otto's grades, and he had missing assignments in all his classes, even the classes he liked. Now Otto sat at the kitchen table, and Teri watched him work. Sometimes Teri felt that she was working harder than Otto was.

He had positioned himself so that his screen was facing away from her. This was common. "What do you have for homework today?" she asked.

"Not much," he replied.

"What about that English paper that was due last week? If you don't have a lot of new work, maybe you can make that up."

"Oh, I did that already."

Teri hesitated. It was possible that he had. The teacher might not have had time to enter the grade yet—it certainly was still missing in the online gradebook—but Otto had lied about this kind of thing before.

"Did you get it turned in?" she prodded, knowing that finishing the assignment and turning it in were two very different things.

Otto nodded, paying more attention to the computer screen than to the conversation. Teri got up to put her water glass on the counter and snag a peek at what he was working on. His hands flashed against the keyboard, and she saw a window minimize but didn't catch what had been on it. Probably not homework.

Teri, like the other parents in this study, feels tired and helpless when it comes to her son's underachievement. She feels that she is working harder than he is, monitoring him as he works and attempting to get him to tell the truth about the amount of work he has, and even what he is working on as he sits at the table near her. For his part, Otto is

exerting what control and maintaining what boundaries he feels he can, by positioning the computer screen where she cannot easily see it and giving vague answers to her questions.

They are repeating a toxic dynamic that has played out many times before. Teri wants to trust her son, but he has lied enough times that she feels she cannot. He finds the level of control his parents exert over him and their lack of trust to be intolerable, and so carves out his own space with disobedience and by ignoring them as much as possible in the current situation. Neither is getting any benefit from this. Neither feels like s/he has a choice in taking part. Trust is gone on both sides.

Anecdote 12: E and T. Otto had insisted on taking two AP classes and two pre-AP classes this year. Edward and Teri had cautioned him when he made that decision. "Are you sure? That will be a lot of work. If you want to take an AP class, choose a subject that you're really interested in." But Otto wanted to turn things around, all at once, once and for all. They had tried to reason with him, get him to think through past mistakes and how to avoid them now that he was in these tough classes. They wanted him to learn from his mistakes.

Yet, here they all were, again. Otto was failing or close to failing most of his classes, following his usual pattern of neglecting to turn in work, even if it was partially or completely finished. They had taken away his Xbox privileges, and he was starting to really slack on soccer since his continuing eligibility problems meant that he never got to play in any of the games.

Teri logged off of Campus Portal.

"Three missing grades in History," Teri told Edward, "and at least one in every other class, including the English paper he said he's finished."

"I would rather he just say, 'Nope, I didn't do it. I don't plan on doing it.'" Edward replied. "But I don't think he believes me. I can't stand that he lies to us."

This was the pattern Edward and Teri had seen every year since middle school. Elementary school had been easy for him, and the teachers in middle school would give him chance after chance to complete late work. Now, he overestimated how much he was actually getting done and underestimated how much there was to do, every semester, until the last few weeks. Edward knew that

if they didn't stay more involved than he felt they really should, an "Oh, shit!" moment of the semester would bring on two or three weeks of marathon 20-hour days. Again. It was a constant battle, creating problems for the family at a personal level. It was beginning to seem that it was just not worth it.

Even though it had been happening for years, Edward still couldn't make it make sense. "I know he wants to do well. He knows that he can, but then there's all that work in between to actually make it happen. He is smart. He should just get it. I don't think we need to change. It is his problem!"

"You weren't great at school, either."

"But I always knew how to work. He just doesn't work. I thought that ... that if we showed him a better way, an easier way than what we took, he could learn from our mistakes."

Otto, like many others in the study, feels a sense of optimism for the beginning of each school year. This optimism, particularly optimism that students will be able to conform to societal expectations of the "good student" is discussed more in depth in the student temporal experience section of Chapter 6. The important thing about this part of his experience in this context is that it reflects his belief that to reach the "good student" ideal he must decide to exert his will toward that end, and that failure to do so is a weakness on his part.

Otto's parents are inclined to be skeptical that things will change, that Otto will be able to turn things around, and they express their skepticism openly. They want to shield him from his proven pattern of underachievement and believe in being open and upfront with their son, so they caution him about his proposed class load. He hears their lack of belief in him, and this could provide further motivation to attempt to prove them wrong by taking on this large burden of classes. It also feels to him like a lack of trust. They want to allow him to make his own choice, perhaps in hope that he will succeed if he is allowed to choose, but also so that he can learn to be responsible for the consequences of

his choices. A lack of trust exists on Teri and Edward's side as well, because Otto has repeatedly lied about work amounts and completion.

The pattern of underachievement Edward and Teri have seen in their son has been present for a long time. They see that this pattern may have been exacerbated by the actions of the school and certain teachers, who held back consequences for procrastination while he was in middle school—where grades didn't hold long-term consequences—and then enforcing harder deadlines in high school after the procrastination was an ingrained habit. Conversations with him about how his own behavior contributes to his underachievement and ways to make different choices seem to fall on deaf ears and have little to no impact.

When Otto does fall into his usual pattern, his parents also fall into their roles, taking away privileges and trying to provide extrinsic negative motivation, as well as vigilantly monitoring his work completion. Like Bella's parents, they encourage him to turn in partially complete or what Otto considers subpar work in order to comply at least partially with the systems of the school. (See Chapters 6 and 8 for further discussion of how this erodes his sense of trust in their judgement, as this interacts with his perfectionism to give him a sense that turning in subpar work would violate his sense of integrity.)

Otto has been underachieving for a long time and the dynamic between parents and child have grown tense over the years, as Edward and Teri see a child with great potential begin to close off opportunities with the choices that he makes. In an attempt to help, they have found themselves getting "involved more than we should" (as Teri put it)

exerting more and more control, so that he will make the decisions and exhibit the behaviors day to day that will increase his achievement. They see Otto as defiant and are becoming desperate to change his behavior, trajectory, and outcome. His day-to-day behavior doesn't change no matter what they try. They have looked for outside help from books and parenting advice tapes, but these have also shown little to no effect, and Edward is skeptical that a \$50 book or a \$300 set of CDs would have any real impact. They are so exhausted that they have started to look at alternative options for Otto, such as a GED.

When it comes down to it, Edward does not understand why Otto cannot seem to capitalize on his obvious intellectual and creative gifts. He doesn't understand Otto's point of view, feelings, and experience. Edward knows that even when he did underachieve himself, he still always knew how to work, a value he believes his son lacks. This leads him to a point where he feels that Otto is simply in the wrong. Edward doesn't see the world as a complicated place: you choose to work at being happy and successful or you don't. Those who make choices like Otto is making, who don't choose to work at it, usually achieve neither happiness nor success, and the world keeps turning. Watching him choose to be unhappy hurts.

Finn's mom Megan. Megan works in human resources at a local university. She and Finn's father are divorced, and Megan and Finn live together full time with their three dogs and two cats.

Anecdote 13: M. Megan sat with her daughter Finn as they talked about Finn's class registration for next year. The form required a parent signature, otherwise Megan would have had to contact the school to track down the information. Finn

had been so excited when she first started looking into next year's schedule. Her English teacher had encouraged her to take AP, and she had been looking at some advanced science options as well. But Finn had decided not to sign up for those. She had even decided to drop out of orchestra altogether. It's like she would rather not do something she loves than fail at something she loves, Megan thought. Like the risk is too great.

"Honey, you really have to sign up for symphony orchestra." She knew the reluctance came from dropping from second chair freshman year to fifth chair now. She had talked to Mr. Veris at Spring conferences, and he had almost guaranteed Finn would get in again if she auditioned, but Finn didn't seem to hear this reassurance.

"No," Finn replied. "No, I'll audition and if I make it, then I'll add it."

With auditions coming up, it would make sense for Finn to spend extra time practicing, to regain ground. That was not what was happening. Instead, she seemed to be giving up. She was practicing less.

"No, you really need to add it now, because if you don't, you're kind of telling Mr. Veris that you have given up."

Finn shook her head again. Megan looked at her thin, shy daughter, wondering at how sometimes she could seem so fragile, and still so stubborn, too. Finn would regret the decision, she was sure. Finn loved cello, a lot of her friends were in orchestra, the only time she really saw them. Things were better now that Finn was with Megan full time, getting math help from Megan's boyfriend, rather than her ex-husband, who had always yelled at Finn when she struggled—to the point where Finn just froze and shut down. Things were better, but Finn still had no confidence. Megan was counting the days until the insurance switched over and she could get Finn back on her antidepressants and talking to the psychiatrist. Maybe that would help.

After finding middle ground about some of Finn's other class choices, Megan signed the form.

Megan has noticed Finn's aversion to risk taking, particularly in areas in which she excels. This puzzles her, as she herself is quite proud of Finn's creative accomplishments. She doesn't understand why her daughter tends to hide her creations from friends. She is also aware of how hard Finn takes negative feedback, such as being moved down in position in orchestra. She tries to advocate for what she considers to be

Finn's best long-term interests. She has found that, often, the person she has to advocate with is Finn herself. Megan has more confidence in Finn's abilities than Finn does.

Megan doesn't know what to do to help Finn's self-defeating behavior (such as spending less time practicing before auditions). She doesn't really understand the source of this behavior, but she tries to deal with each incident piecemeal. She is used to dealing with the contradictory sides of her daughter, and to the fact that, depending which side wins in any given situation, Finn may work to her own detriment. She is fragile, so she protects herself from risk; she is stubborn in her decision to protect herself. Megan sees orchestra as one of Finn's main social outlets and worries that the decision to drop the class will isolate her. Megan perceives this isolation as a negative and worries Finn—an already solitary person—will become lonely. She worries that Finn doesn't see all the possible negative consequences to her self-protective choices.

Megan's ex-husband was an authoritarian father, criticizing Finn when she needed help. Megan suspects that Finn's interactions with her father have contributed to her fear of risk and failure, and perhaps her difficulty trusting others to see her creative endeavors kindly. She feels worried and helpless to fix these problems.

Megan has seen both counseling and medication help Finn to face her fears. It is unfortunate that Finn needs to make choices about next year's classes while off her meds, as Megan feels that Finn might make more confident choices if she were getting treatment for her depression. However, despite her reservations about Finn's decisions, she sees this as an area where she has limited influence. She knows she will succeed in changing some of Finn's ideas, but not all. Finn will have the final say.

George’s parents John and Melody. John and Melody are retired and have three children from earlier in their lives, a 40-year-old daughter, a 35-year-old son, and a 36-year-old son. They adopted George 17 years ago when he was only six days old and have grandchildren his age.

Anecdote 14: J and ML. George came home with science homework.

“Can I look at your Chemistry?” Melody offered as he completed a worksheet.

“No, I got it.”

Melody reflected on the change in her son. This was the first year that he didn’t need regular help with most subjects. In previous years, if it was math homework, her older, grown son—who was a math teacher—would sit down with George and patiently help re-teach some of the concepts he had trouble retaining from year to year. Most other subjects, either John or Melody would help, checking for correct answers and guiding him to revisit content that was a struggle. They had done Learning Rx, Mathnasium, private tutors, whatever they needed to do to help George stay at grade level. They had known from the moment they adopted him at six days old that there could be learning issues: his birth mother had overdosed on cocaine eight times while pregnant.

George needed less help with his homework these days than in years past. Melody remembered the times when he would rush through to get finished with worksheets or other work, knowing full well that some teachers simply checked for completion, not for correct answers. But she helped him to understand that he needed to not only do the work, but to understand what he was doing and have correct answers on preliminary work so that he would have tools to study from when tests came. George now saw school as his job, and he seemed to take pride in doing his job well. Occasionally, he would still yell about homework, but that seemed more like blowing off steam when he got home where he felt comfortable, and it would pass quickly. He had learned to check his grades on his own and talk to teachers when his grades started to dip. He was good at following rules, meeting deadlines, and doing what he was told. This, combined with hard-won study skills, had gotten him moved from an IEP to a 504, allowed him to stop taking his ADD medication, and really prepared him for life after high school. He might not be ready to take on a four-year college (several had expressed interest in him for his twirling skills), but he was growing up. He had even gotten paid for running a twirling workshop at a local studio. Things had gone so well that they were seeing what would be involved in having him teach a class through the rec center in the summer.

As she watched her youngest son work, she was confident that their hard work had paid off and he would be OK.

George is a near-miss for underachievement. He could easily have had difficulty in school, particularly due to risk factors including a mother who overdosed while he was in-utero. But a strong support system at his adopted home helped avert this possibility. It is useful in phenomenology to have a non-example of the phenomenon to use contrast to help illustrate what is and what is not part of the experience (van Manen, 1990, 122). George and his parents are such a non-example.

Melody and her family have had success with various strategies for helping George do well in school, despite his disabilities. Though they still offer him the type of help he has needed in the past, they respect his assessment of his own needs, and his hard-won independence. When he says he doesn't need help, they know that he is not putting them off, but rather is telling the truth. This is in sharp contrast with other participant families, in which truth-telling and trust are consistent issues. Melody and her husband John set a goal to keep George working at grade level, and he has reached the point where he can now do this independently. This is also in contrast to other participants. Many students and parents were aware of high student potential early in the child's life, and underachievement was an unexpected negative that seemed to contradict expectations. These families did not start with the understanding that their child was at risk and approach it as a difficulty to be averted. To most of the parents in the study, underachievement is an unexpected burden, and for many it is a somewhat incomprehensible one.

Most of the parents in the study see school as a place to learn, but also as a system which sets up useless hoops to jump through. While they acknowledge that jumping through hoops is a real-life skill in itself, they emphasized with their children that work completion is important for the credit it will award them in the class. Melody and John, in contrast, helped George to see that even hoop-jumping exercises could be used for the personal benefit of learning. They emphasized understanding, not grades, and helped George see preliminary work as a means to that end. He now incorporates this understanding into his entire approach to school.

Melody does not consider George defiant, and never has. She sees a clear distinction between blowing off steam about homework (as he still does sometimes) and reluctance or refusal to do it well. She simply sees complaints about homework as a demonstration of the fact that George feels safe and supported at home, that he won't be judged as irresponsible for complaining. Though George used to blast through his work without a care for what he was doing, he has learned to slow down and use the work to his advantage. He is now taking on responsibility for using the coping skills (like checking grades and self-advocating with teachers) that he has learned throughout his schooling, and Melody is proud of him for this. Most of the parents in the study have had little to no luck teaching coping and organizational skills, and many see outbursts about homework as part of the larger problem, requiring controlling action on their part.

Most of the parents in the study have moderate to severe worry about the future prospects of their students, and whether they will be able to make it on their own after graduation or moving out of the family home. Melody sees that George is using his

creative strengths in the real world as a possible career path. She has confidence that he will become an independent adult. He will be OK.

Creatively Gifted High School Students

The following anecdotes are based on interviews of student participants at the beginning of the school year and near the end of the school year, as well as on observations and artifacts of their creative endeavors. Student participants also participated in a co-creative activity to ensure that the writing of anecdotes and the discussions that follow accurately represent their experiences.

Abby. Abby is in her final year at the school and is on-track to graduate, having made up some failed classes using an online credit recovery program.

***Anecdote 15: A.** Abby's mom wasn't home when she arrived home. She saw her younger sister beginning to settle down at the kitchen table where they all did homework after school, but she really wanted to go upstairs to her room. She had made a bunch of her origami bricks in history class during the lecture, and she really wanted to start using them to build a new bird. She knew she didn't have a lot of time at home, anyway, since she would be headed back to school for band rehearsal at 6:30 and wouldn't leave the school again until 9:30. They were practicing every night this week to prepare for competition, and she was excited, but tired. She was the only synth player in the band, so she had to get her part right. She hadn't had a chance to work on drawing for weeks, and homework just didn't seem as important as getting a chance to be by herself, in her room, relaxing with her artwork. Plus, she had some ideas for a story that she wanted to get down on paper before she forgot them. She grabbed her backpack and clarinet case from the table where she had set them and headed upstairs. She would come down to do homework when Mom got home.*

The anecdote above begins to give us a picture of who Abby is, and how her creativity interacts with other parts of her life. Right away, it is apparent that she is a polymath: she is creative in many different areas. She not only plays the synthesizer in band after school, she also plays clarinet during her band class. Music isn't her only

creative area, however. She enjoys drawing when she has the time. She also does a form of modular origami, in which she makes the building “bricks” first (small, fortune-cookie shaped components which interlock), then nests the pieces to build elaborate bird forms. She works on these origami bricks during class to help stay engaged in what she would otherwise find to be a boring activity (like a lecture).

The many creative activities she engages in are time-consuming. When I calculated her rehearsal and class time (based on her interview), I found that she spends fourteen hours a week (or more with extra practices) on music (synthesizer, piano, and clarinet), including a self-imposed 30 minutes a day on keyboard any day she doesn’t have after-school band rehearsals. Her other creative endeavors ebb and flow as band season starts and stops, but she never stops doing any of them completely, even in weeks when extra rehearsals are scheduled. This shows that she is extremely dedicated and self-motivated in all these pursuits. She is not lazy.

Competing for her time and attention are her classes and homework. Though her family has set up designated space and time for homework, when no authority is there to enforce the family norms, the lure of her creative activities can be too strong, and often she will choose to go to her room instead and work on one of her creative passions. The solitude of her room is also a draw. She considers herself an introvert. While she loves band, it is a very social situation, as are many situations—both in and out of class—at school. She has only a few hours at home, away from other people to recharge her batteries. Engaging in creative activities helps her to build energy and relax. With these strong motivations to choose drawing, playing music, or working on origami in her room,

it is a hard choice to do homework, especially without the immediate extrinsic motivation of her mother's presence.

Did she make the wrong choice? Choosing not to do her homework may have negative consequences for her grade. School and her parents expect her to get her homework done. Both these authorities feel that she should prioritize this obligation over what they consider to be her hobbies. The "hobbies" are fun; they may be viewed as a form of play, rather than a respected endeavor. Yet, she has repeatedly received accolades for these pursuits: her origami birds appeared in a community art show. The band she plays in has won repeated state-level honors in competitions and has been invited to play for parades at Pearl Harbor and even at Normandy in France for the World War II commemoration that will take place there next year. In her band teacher, she sees someone who has made a successful career first as a tuba player in the Marine Corps band, and now as a high school band teacher. Should she value work that may not teach her anything she will find relevant later in life (as she sees it) over work that she loves and finds intrinsically motivating as well as extrinsically lauded, which also restores her energy and mental harmony? These questions challenge the foundation of school authority to set curricular norms in addition to the expectations and values of a society in terms of which careers are seen as prestigious, as well as attainable, and which have low status and/or are seen as long shots for earning a steady living.

***Anecdote 16: A.** When the bell rang after lunch, Abby reluctantly left the band hallway and made her way to her History class. They were going to be talking about Lincoln and the Civil War. Again. It wasn't like they were learning anything new. They had covered all of this in middle school. And in elementary school. She didn't really understand why the repetition was necessary.*

After entering the small brick room on the first floor, she got a Chromebook from the cart and went to her spot. She slid her bag under her desk and sat down. This was one of those uncomfortable desks, the ones with the hard-plastic blue chairs that were permanently attached to the desk, so you couldn't scoot closer or farther from it or really sit comfortably at all. As she opened the computer and logged on to her account—messaging up twice, she hated computers!—she reminded herself to pay attention today. Lectures always bored her, and they were common in this class. The final bell rang, and Mr. Johnson began to talk, reminding them to take notes. She wanted to get out paper to make origami bricks, since they often helped her pay attention. In some classes, she would take them out without even asking permission, and most teachers didn't have a problem with it once she explained how it helped her. But Mr. Johnson was intimidating, and a first-year teacher. Abby had had trouble convincing novice teachers that she was telling the truth about being able to pay attention better when her hands were busy, so this time she didn't even try.

The lecture went on, and she tried to listen, she really did, but she kept thinking about how important it was to pay attention rather than actually paying attention. It was like dozing off and being awake at the same time. Like being there and coherent, but also like seeing through someone else's eyes. She was there. She knew she was there. But she also felt like she was not actually there.

She dropped back into the real world when she heard people getting up and moving. Quickly glancing at the slide projected at the front of the room, she realized they were heading into some kind of group work, and she had missed the directions. She glanced at the clock at the bottom of the computer screen and saw that 30 minutes of lecture had gone by, and she hadn't absorbed any of it. Taking her computer with her, she walked over to the two people in class she usually felt most comfortable working with and tried to pick up on what they were doing.

Abby has a definite preference for her creative classes (band, creative writing, drawing, and poetry). She has a lot more difficulty in her core classes where her underachievement begins to show. She finds repetition boring, even if that repetition is after a long hiatus (even years). While she knows that she will be dealing with the information in more depth with each repetition, it still feels slow and unnecessary. When her interest lags, so does her attention, and she begins to lose track of what is happening. The outer world recedes, and she inhabits an inner world instead. At this point, even if

the class moves on to more or deeper information than what she remembers from previous years—information she might find interesting and might need to complete classwork or homework—she has nothing to bring her attention back to the here and now, unless there is movement or noise.

She has developed a few coping mechanisms. One is to make her origami bricks. This occupies part of her attention and keeps her grounded in the physical world, so she is less likely to lose track of what is going on around her. However, not all teachers are open to having a student working with her hands rather than taking notes, and she doesn't always feel comfortable self-advocating.

The physical space doesn't help with her concentration level. While an uncomfortable chair may, in some cases, help keep a student's attention in the now, for others it provides additional distraction or motivation to mentally go somewhere else where the discomfort can be ignored. Abby is also uncomfortable using computers. They are closed systems to her, which she doesn't feel able to troubleshoot if something goes wrong. Their increasing prevalence, particularly in core classes, preys on an area she feels is one of her weakest. When there is no paper and pencil or other physical option for turning in work, particularly make-up work after an illness, she feels that she starts at a disadvantage. This contributes to distraction, lack of agency, and disengagement. When Abby's attention drifts, her time sense goes away. She is not able to recall what she was thinking about (unlike some other study participants who describe having conversations with themselves at times like this).

This classroom situation is a confluence of factors which combine to expose and prey on Abby's weaknesses as a student, while failing to capitalize on her strengths. She doesn't see how the subject matter is relevant to her life, so her interest is already low. She has not been given the opportunity to accelerate through or entirely test out of activities and assignments whose content she already knows. This not only contributes to boredom but also the anticipation of boredom, lowering engagement. Whether actual or perceived, she feels that she is not welcome to use her coping mechanism of making origami bricks to increase her engagement, nor are there any options to become more active in her acquisition of the information. She has found no way to tie it to her interests or to anything she feels she is good at. She is physically uncomfortable and doesn't feel that she belongs in the room or with the teacher, and she doesn't have any particular affinity to the students in the class. Overall, she feels disengaged, unwelcome, and like the entire situation has little relevance. This class has nothing to do with her. She is only there for the credit and has no reason (and little opportunity) to work to her potential.

Steve. Steve is a freshman this year. It is his fourth year in this district and his first in high school. He has an IEP for his vision problems and for ADD inattentive type.

***Anecdote 17: S.** Steve pushed off with his left foot, propelling the scooter under his right foot forward over the lip of concrete and into the large bowl in the center of the skate park. His friend Daniel was at the other side, filming on his phone. When Steve reached the bottom of the bowl, he knew he had enough speed. He rushed up the other side, caught air, and twisted his feet off the scooter base, swinging it around in a beautiful tail-whip. The wheels touched down under his feet, and he spun to the right, stopping a few feet from Daniel. "Your turn," he said, swapping scooter for phone with his friend. He had been helping Daniel learn the trick over the summer (though he had learned it himself from watching internet videos and practicing a lot). Daniel almost had it down.*

Steve saw the clock on the phone as he unlocked it to get ready to film. They had spent almost five hours out here this Sunday, and he knew his Mom would be picking him up soon to spend time with the family. He also had homework to do. He didn't get it done yesterday, instead spending a fair amount of the day watching YouTube tutorials that helped him with his computer game design stuff. That, and snapchatting with some of his old friends from Plainsville.

He hadn't seen them at all this semester. Steve didn't make friends easily, but people were important to him. He now had a few people here that he liked and could do stuff with, built from a few acquaintances he had known here even before the move. Some, like Daniel, liked scooter almost as much as he did, while he had a few other friends who were on his Robotics team. Still, he missed his old friends. Spending time with them was a lot more important than doing homework.

Daniel was speeding up the side of the bowl while Steve filmed, but he didn't have enough speed. He tried it anyway and fell spectacularly on the landing, his feet tangled in the scooter. A groan of "Oh," went around the park from those who had seen the fall. Steve went over to help Daniel up. Daniel was limping a little but shook it off. Steve saw he would be OK.

Steve is a polymath. He codes (a skill he learned in a 6th grade coding class), works with hardware to build computers and robots, and spends time designing characters for computer games, something he would eventually like to pursue as a career. These activities are consuming enough that his time-sense falls away, which can make it difficult for him to anticipate how long activities will take him or understand how much time he has spent on activities he may value more than activities others wish he would prioritize.

Like Abby, Steve has the ability to persist at creative activities (like learning scooter tricks) for long periods of time to master specific self-set goals. Working on his scooter is its own reward, aesthetically, intellectually, and physically, implying that it may help him reach a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Assigned work—especially homework—doesn't usually have the same draw. Sometimes he does forget about this

work, but a lot of time, it just isn't foremost in his mind, so he forgets without completely forgetting. Rather, he chooses not to think about it unless forced to by his parents.

He has difficulty forming new friendships, due partially to a move, partially to introversion, and possibly due to asynchrony differences (compounded by his 2E status, which will be explored more in a moment). Still, his social life is extremely important to him. His creative activities provide a social framework that allows him to find people with common interests and an avenue for building friendships around these interests. This adds to the importance of these activities. These “off-task” activities are his main way of connecting with his peers—something that doesn't happen very much in class. Without them, he would find himself socially isolated.

***Anecdote 18:** S. Steve adjusted his glasses and went back to looking at the lecture notes. Mr. Werner was good about giving him notes ahead of time, as directed in Steve's IEP. But it didn't really help much. In some ways, it just made lectures more boring.*

He fiddled with his pencil, holding it slightly behind the center of gravity and gently moving it up and down. This gave it the illusion of bending and waving in space. His grip slipped, and he dropped the pencil. It fell on the left side of the desk, where the bar connecting the desk to the chair kept him from reaching down to the floor easily. He slid down in his chair, got his arm under the bar, and snagged the pencil off the ground. By the time he was sitting back up looking at the front of the class, he had managed to knock the notes off his desk on the other side. They had fluttered out of easy reach. He snaked his foot forward to drag them closer, then bent down to the right of his desk and picked up the notes. This was so boring.

Class was just something he was supposed to do. He did his real learning at home. YouTube had videos about how to do almost anything he wanted, whether it was computer game and character design, or how to build that new part of the robot his team was working on. He subscribed to several blogs about that stuff and wanted to get home to see the latest one.

Students around him were moving, getting out their homework to turn in. Steve looked down at his bag and knew his homework wasn't in there. He didn't feel too anxious about it, though. Mr. Werner would give him extra time on his

homework if he asked—it was on his IEP for his vision problems and ADD. At least he would be able to turn it in for partial credit. As long as he kept at least a D, no one would bother him about school too much. His Mom would, but the teachers wouldn't. They worried about the kids with Fs. As long as he was passing, he was doing fine.

Once the homework was in, Mr. Werner went over the requirements for tonight's homework, passing a worksheet around the room. Then it was time to go. Steve grabbed the worksheet and notes and shoved them in his bag. Then he got out his phone and began scrolling through as he waited by the door to go home.

Steve has worn glasses since he was three years old, and bifocals since he was about four. The vision issues impeded his ability to read, and eventually he was placed on an IEP allowing him extra time on tests and to take tests in a separate room with someone reading the questions to him. He also receives class notes upon request and preferential seating at the front of the room. Once he was seated at the front of the room, his teachers began to notice difficulties with distractions and fidgeting, and in fifth grade he was tested for and diagnosed with ADD inattentive type, for which he now receives medication. The medication often begins to wear out at the end of the day, making his last period classes a concentration challenge.

In the anecdote presented above, we can see how small distractions can completely absorb his attention for extended periods of time. His attention is divided between accomplishing the task of picking up dropped materials and doing so slowly and quietly so as not to draw attention to himself. In fact, avoiding attention is something he spends a lot of energy on, doing just enough work for a class to escape notice and the subsequent interference from teachers that this would bring. He uses his IEP to further this end, knowing at some level that his teachers may expect less of him. Whereas a D

from another student might be cause for concern, a D from him may be considered acceptable. This buys him space for his own activities—from programming to playing with pencils—and allows him to do a minimum amount of work. This is not to say that his disorganization and tendency to forget homework is deliberate. He genuinely struggles with these issues. But the lack of teacher attention to his underachievement lowers the amount of external pressure to work on them. He has come to have a different idea of what doing well in school looks like for him than his parents do. He is aware of this difference, but it is not enough on its own to change his actions. The lowered teacher expectations that come with an IEP, coupled with his high science and math abilities, have given him a sense that he will be fine, able to learn it on his own, and he wishes that everyone would just stop bothering him.

The videos he finds online are his preferred method of learning. They allow him to find and process information at his own pace, and to follow his interests and any questions that arise. He can follow tangents without penalty, letting his curiosity guide him, with no reprimand or negative consequence for “getting off track.” He is the one controlling the learning. No one assesses his performance, and usually he has no one to compare himself to. He has no desire for classes to be offered at school in his creativity areas. If they were, he would no longer be the one making the choices.

Bella. Bella is a freshman this year. Her father has been designing and building their new house, and she expects to move into it soon with her parents and her sister.

***Anecdote 19: B.** Bella sat in the band hallway during lunch doing homework. She knew that if she could get it done here, now, she would get close to finishing it. She knew that when she got home, she wouldn't feel like focusing on school. But*

here at school, even during time outside of class, she didn't mind doing the work. She was at school, so she felt focused on schoolwork, even if homework was pointless. She glanced at her phone. Lunch was almost over. She got out her planner and wrote down the two assignments that she hadn't finished. The bell rang, and she walked to her next class.

When she got home, her mom asked her if she had any homework she still needed to do. Bella thought about it, then replied she had finished it at lunch. She didn't remember there were two unfinished assignments. She didn't remember to check her planner. She was thinking about the writing she wanted to do, and feeling her shoulders unknot since she wasn't surrounded by other people, having to smile and talk. She was being her home self. She went to her room and turned on her computer, opening the second chapter of the most recent story she was working on. It felt good to be home.

Bella is extremely sensitive to anything that activates her vision or other senses.

The space that she exists in at any given moment has a huge effect on her sense of self, her reality, and her memory. Think of a time when you got up from the couch to get something, moved to another room to find it, only to forget what you had gone to get in the first place. One of the best ways to remember is to return to the couch. You will almost immediately have access to the knowledge of what you had forgotten. This is how Bella experiences place and memory, but on a grander scale. Her priorities shift drastically based on context. This affects what she will remember about work, goals, plans, and actions. School assignments (even homework), planners, studying for tests, these are school context memories and priorities. When she is at school, they are at the forefront of her attention. When she gets home, the place of writing, drawing, music practice, and other solitary, self-motivated activities, school-associated priorities shift to the bottom, and her home associated priorities shift to the top.

Because the context helps her define her priorities and sense of self, she is faster at doing school-associated activities while at school. Context helps her focus. She has

even expressed a desire to be able to take core classes during the summer at school so that she will have more time for the creative activities she enjoys, including the various bands at school. She does not seem to classify band activities with other school activities. It is its own valued space where home (personal) priorities, school priorities, and even social priorities overlap.

The school-associated priorities and behaviors take more energy to maintain than those Bella prioritizes at home. They feel imposed from the outside (extrinsic), and conforming to these expectations takes conscious thought and effort. As a strong introvert, she finds being around others—whether in the overcrowded hallways or during the frequent group work imposed in class—draining. Her time alone at home helps her to recharge. The band hall is her most comfortable place at school because she knows the people who hang out there well. She feels socially safe as they have bonded through structured activities like band camp. A tension is always present while at school—even in the band hall—that she can shed at home.

Context is not the only factor affecting Bella's memory of homework. The draw of her creative activities also pulls her away. As seen with other study participants, her creative activities are intrinsically motivated and self-rewarding. As a band member, her time is severely limited. Sometimes it is a choice between activities that will replenish her energy and sense of self, and those activities imposed on her from the outside (like homework and unfinished classwork). Add to this the fact that Bella doesn't feel homework helps her understanding of school material, and it becomes easy to see how it can slip her attention. Her ADD inattentive type and disorganization mean that she is

unlikely to be able to draw upon organizational coping skills like using a planner to help her remember homework. She is motivated to not remember.

***Anecdote 20: B.** At lunch, Bella sat in the band hallway doing homework. Last class had been all group work—building spaghetti bridges—and she felt drained. Even here, the place in school where she felt most relaxed, where she liked the people and could let her guard down, she sometimes liked having the excuse not to talk to people. Of course, some days, she really enjoyed talking to her friends. School was a chance to see them, pretty much the only chance, since she never really scheduled time to get together with them outside of school. But not today.*

They saw her working and didn't bother her. They all spent so many hours practicing that they knew sometimes you needed lunch to get stuff done. That was one of the things about school. It gave you an excuse to talk to other people, to do stuff with them, but it gave you a way to avoid them, too.

Except when there was group work! She didn't want to come across as a control freak, but the way her group had been tying the spaghetti together took such a long time, it bugged her and made her tense, like a tickly feeling on her skin, like her body was urging her to go and fix it, but her mind was telling her not to say anything. She just didn't have anything in common with the group she had been assigned to, so she couldn't speak up. And now, she just didn't feel like talking to anyone, not even her friends.

School (and school activities like band) are Bella's only consistent place and time for social interaction. Bella often finds it difficult to overcome her inherent shyness to interact with her peers. School and school activities give her a chance to forge these connections. But, as an introvert, she needs time to be alone, even if it is alone in her head, surrounded by others she ignores. She has learned to use schoolwork as a way to buy her that space in the crowded atmosphere at school.

She has found a specific subculture within the school in which she feels comfortable: Band. This subculture is cultivated through structured activities, including band camp, where students share a common goal centered around a chosen interest (their music). With the focus on the task at hand, rather than on "getting to know you," social

stress is lowered, and students get to know each other while working together. This has helped Bella feel comfortable around her classmates and build friendships that she can rely on.

Band, by its nature, is communal, with work accomplished with and dependent on a group. None of the student study participants involved with band, orchestra, or team activities like soccer or twirling team see these as “group work,” however, a term they associated with academic classes in which they are placed in small groups of three to five students to complete some task, like a poster or presentation. These activities are almost universally disliked by the study participants, especially if they are associated with a group grade. Communal team work, on the other hand, is valued and enjoyed. These communal teams are defined by their common self-chosen interest, work toward a goal, and reliance on each team member for communal goal success, positive social interactions, and intrinsic motivation. “Group work” tends to be assigned, is extrinsically motivated by a grade and/or a presentation in front of the class evoking social anxiety and pressure, and often team members can slack off, relying on one or two members (often study participants) to do the work for the entire group. “Group work” is punitive in its motivators. Students see the bad things that could happen if they mess it up but find few positive results.

Bella does have positive experiences with group work if it is focused on knowledge acquisition and practice, with no grade attached (unlike the group work in the anecdote above). Without a grade attached, group work helps lower the stakes and increase risk taking, and Bella finds she can rely on her peers to help her course correct,

see things from other points of view, or remember information she has forgotten. Also, with no grade attached to a group activity, she feels less pressure to make sure a classmate's work is up to her standards, and so these activities become an opportunity to get to know others rather than control them and their work or feel withdrawn if the courage to intervene withers under social pressures not to be bossy. In general, though, she prefers working alone. That way she can put things in her own words as she researches them or works on them, and that helps her understand it better.

As an introvert, Bella is at a constant disadvantage throughout the school day. A high value is placed on group work and learning to work together, both of which she finds difficult. The school is overcrowded, draining her energy. By the end of the day, she is highly motivated to dissociate with school-related activities. So, when she does get home, she has no desire to interact with her friends. This in itself can be socially isolating for her, as she chooses between strengthening friendships and finally getting time for herself. She doesn't seem to even be aware that this is a choice she is making, as the thought of getting together with friends outside of school in her busy schedule doesn't really occur to her. Her need to be alone is that strong.

Otto. Otto is a sophomore this year. He lives in a newly built house with both of his parents. He also has an older brother who no longer lives with the family but is out on his own.

***Anecdote 21: O.** Otto finished dressing out and left the locker room, entering the high-ceilinged gym, with its glassy wood floor and buzzing overhead lights. It was the third day of the soccer unit, and Otto was having a blast. He would have liked it even better if they were playing out on the field, but the weather was bad today, so they would play in here. That made it just like the futsal league he used to play*

in. He watched as his classmates began to get out the practice balls and try to control them, dribbling with their feet from one end of the gym to the other, or attempting to. He guided his ball, dodging imaginary opponents as he moved across the floor, easily evading rogue balls that escaped his classmates' control, as well as the students who dashed after them. He loved soccer, was on the school team, and had been playing the game since he was four years old. But what was even more fun here was that nobody had any idea what they were doing, while for him, it was a piece of cake. Sure, he was ineligible this week—his grades were too low, again, mostly due to how bored he was in History and Art and that he had not turned in some assignments in English—but he didn't want to think about that right now. Here and now, he was king.

Otto is in his element. He has previous experience in soccer and is confident in his own expertise. He has a strong tendency to compare himself to others and assumes that others are comparing themselves to him, so though he often experiences perfectionism related anxiety, his confidence in his superior skills at this activity makes him feel good. He is relaxed and even feels somewhat superior.

While Otto is highly motivated by the activities he enjoys and pursues on his own, on school issues, he constantly monitors how he is doing in relation to others. He is aware of their grades and his own, whether he knows more on certain subjects than they do, whether they work harder at things than he does. He has come to expect that he will know more than his peers and be better at any assignment that he puts his mind to. This happens in all his interest areas, not just soccer, and since he is interested in almost everything, he expects himself to be better at everything than everyone else. This puts him in a terrible bind. If he is better and more knowledgeable than his classmates, classes may not challenge him enough for him to be learning. This can cause him to lose motivation, stop paying attention, and fail to turn in work. This will result in low grades

that do not reflect what he knows, understands, and is able to do. However, if he is feeling engaged and challenged, he expects his work to be perfect.

***Anecdote 22: O.** Otto sat in front of the drawing again. He had missed the deadline, but still had two weeks to get it in for some credit. This was his fifth restart. Otto loved drawing, but that didn't mean he loved drawing class. He wanted to do what he wanted to do, and some of the exercises just didn't seem necessary. Then, when an assignment came up that he liked, this would happen. He would come up with an idea, start to draw it, and it would build its own momentum. But then, something would go a bit wrong, he would see the flaw in the work, and all his momentum would disappear. Usually when that happened, he would just stop working, or he would scrap the idea and try something else entirely. But, with the momentum gone, it was hard to get started again. It didn't matter that his teacher and his parents said, "just get something done and turned in." It didn't matter that he was better at this than his peers. (If he even was—five restarts!) He saw what was wrong with the drawing, and even the erasure marks were too much of a flaw to make it worth continuing. He balled up the drawing and threw it in the trash, then realized he didn't have another piece of the right kind of paper for the assignment. He'd only brought the one home. If he didn't turn it in, he would end up with a D for the semester, and Dad would ground him from his Xbox over the summer. He sat at the table, defeated.*

Otto loves drawing, but that doesn't mean he loves his drawing class. As with many participants, once a beloved activity is incorporated into a context where it is structured by someone else (including aspects like limited choices of materials, subject matter, etc.), where it is placed in a timeline with a deadline (this could involve too little or too much time), and where it is judged through a grade and possible peer critique (or at least exposure of the activity/product to peers who might judge it), it loses its enjoyment and becomes a chore.

When Otto's choices are limited, sometimes being asked to learn a technique he doesn't see as important or use a material he doesn't like, he loses power. He finds himself in a position where he is asked to place the judgement of another person (in this

case the teacher) ahead of his own, in an area where he already considers himself at least experienced, if not expert. This sets up a power struggle between himself and the teacher in which he can only regain power by not doing what he has been told, and this choice can lead to lower grades that do not reflect his understanding and abilities.

When Otto's timeline is dictated by others, things can go several ways. Sometimes, the time line is suitable, in which case no problem will arise unless he engages in a power struggle. If he knows the material already, he may become bored while waiting for other students to reach his level of knowledge, understanding, and performance. He then often disengages, ignoring requirements, neglecting assignments, and missing the point at which information he doesn't know is introduced. He has expressed frustration that everyone is held to the same standards, and that he cannot accelerate out of material he has already mastered. He can also go in the complete opposite direction. As in the soccer example, he may glory in his superior knowledge, eventually causing social isolation, as others begin to view him as arrogant. If a timeline is too tight, he may dismiss the assignment as pointless as he is not able to go in the depth he feels necessary in the time allowed, and so may feel that the activity is useless. Perfectionism may be a factor in all these.

The presence of a grade on what is usually an enjoyable activity can reinforce his self-judgement, shifting his focus to the extrinsic grade rather than his intrinsic interest, and increasing social anxiety and isolation. It can trigger the same power struggle wherein he resists the idea of relying on the teacher's judgement versus his own.

It can also trigger perfectionism. The possibility of his peers seeing his attempts and of him seeing their attempts puts his sense of self at risk, as he defines himself partially by his sense that he is more knowledgeable and better at most things than his peers. If his work is not up to the level that he expects (perfection), others' work may surpass his own. So, he restarts over and over, to prove that he is who he believes himself to be, to prove that he is better than everyone else, to prove that he has worth.

Perfectionism is a completely black and white experience. There is no room for flaws or failure, and so every mistake or reiteration becomes a threat to the self and a road to complete failure. Lack of perfection equals failure.

Perfectionism, therefore, quickly leads to self-sabotage, including the extreme number of restarts as seen above, failure to complete work, and procrastination to protect the sense of self.

Anecdote 23: O. *The essay was due tomorrow morning. It was assigned a week ago. He had finished the introduction in class. But that was it. Now it was evening, after supper, and he had six pages to go, so, it would probably be 1:00 a.m. when he would finish. The time crunch gave him a hit of adrenalin, and he was ready to get this done.*

Otto knew his parents were frustrated with him every time he did this. He agreed with them . . . in theory. It made sense that you should start on something in plenty of time, important stuff first, and work on it until its completion. When he was able to do that, he would do really well, and get great grades. But for Otto, this rarely seemed to be what happened. Little of the "important" stuff was interesting enough to hold his attention for long, and he would postpone the work until later. If he put things off long enough, suddenly he would get this sense of, "oh crap, this needs to be done," and he would kick into what he thought of as overhaul. It was intense and a scramble, but it was also kind of a rush. When he was in overhaul, he would just go with it, finish it, and turn it in. Then he would get whatever grade he got. Last time he had done an essay in one night he got an A-, when other kids had worked on it all week and gotten a B or B-. He always felt a sense of pride when that happened. It didn't really matter that he hadn't gotten

very far yet. By 1:00 a.m., it would be good enough. If it wasn't, it wouldn't be the first assignment he didn't turn in.

Unlike Bella, Otto doesn't forget the assignments that he needs to get done, he just feels no motivation to do them. Procrastination has provided a way of artificially increasing his motivation beyond the extrinsic pressures of grades and parental expectation. The rush he feels when in "overhaul" feels good. When he gets good grades on work he has put off until the last minute—work he knows he could have done better—he gains a sense of superiority over his peers who had to work harder to reach the same level of achievement. He expects that he will be smarter than his peers, better at things, faster, and more knowledgeable. This is part of how he defines who he is and how he relates to his peers and to school in general. Shortening the time raises the level of challenge; it also gives him an acceptable excuse if he doesn't do well.

Procrastination is, for Otto, a way of asserting control. He prioritizes his own interests above the activities dictated by the school—a school whose judgement on what he needs to do to learn he does not trust as he is regularly underchallenged.

Procrastination artificially raises the level of challenge and gives him an adrenalin rush he enjoys. It also helps him to overcome self-judgement. His expectations of himself are unreasonably high. If he shortens the amount of time he is "able" to spend on an assignment, it becomes acceptable to turn in work that is less than perfect, as he can now have the excuse "I didn't really try on that one. If I had, it would have been better."

Procrastination helps him to preserve his sense of self. Unfortunately, it is a temporary fix. He also knows that he chose to procrastinate, and that this often leads to his low

grades. Thus, the mechanism that keeps him from attacking himself in the short term (*I could have done better if I had really tried*) ends up becoming another weapon he uses against himself (*I am so stupid. Why can't I get things done like normal people?*)

Finn. Finn is a junior this year. Her mother and father are divorced, and she recently started living with her mother full time instead of living with her father on certain weekends.

Anecdote 24: F. Finn zipped up her bag for the first day of school. She was looking forward to school this year. Last year, it just felt like everyone else's expectations were weighing her down, like their expectations were so low that she didn't trust them to understand what she needed, and so what gave them the right to decide what she should be doing? It wasn't like she would be learning much from them, anyway.

This year she realized that she liked to learn just for learning, for knowing, and that school was a place where she could learn. It didn't matter that most of the school felt like it rewarded people for being athletic or popular. This academic setting was where she needed to be to learn. So, she would get out of it the things that she wanted, for herself and her own learning.

Despite their underachievement, these young adults are optimistic, especially at the beginning of the school year. They know that they have huge capabilities, and the restorative time over the summer helps them enter each school year believing that this time it will be different. They will be able to turn it around. Finn loves to learn, believes she is good at it (though not, perhaps, in a school setting), and wishes that school could be a place where she could be successful at it. The promise of knowledge and learning at the beginning of every school year helps her downplay the obstacles she faces and gives her confidence that she will be able to take control of her own learning.

Finn is an extreme perfectionist and is gifted intellectually as well as creatively. She does well in class and things only fall apart when she doesn't like an assignment, doesn't complete homework, or gets disorganized enough to miss deadlines. She sees none of these as a reflection of her understanding or ability. This, combined with her perfectionism leads her to feel that her teachers have expectations of her that are below what she is capable of. She doesn't conform to their expectations, but rather has her own. Experience has shown her that teachers are concerned with bringing students up to a minimum bar of understanding, and that those who come in already at that point tend to be ignored. Setting her own higher expectations has been a way of coping with expectations that don't fit her knowledge, understanding, and ability. This helps her maintain her own interest and learning in an environment that she doesn't feel is meeting her needs.

At the beginning of the year, she feels in control and believes she will be able to meet her own high expectations if she can just ignore the things that hamper her and emphasize the things she loves about school (or the idea of what school will be for her this time). If she can ignore outside opinions and the social hierarchy, which she feels is unjustified and wrong, she will be successful.

***Anecdote 25: F.** It was the third week of school, and the air outside was still oppressively hot. She had her room window propped open, but there was no breeze. She kept thinking about the three homework assignments she had failed to turn in. One, she had just forgotten about, another wasn't up to her standards, and the third was just stupid. Now, her motivation was gone, again. If the day was hot, her mood would slide down into this pit, and she couldn't seem to get herself to do anything.*

You are being stupid, she told herself. You need to get that "about me" presentation done. Telling herself to do it didn't help, it just made her feel bad.

She had started the year so hopeful, and then things had gone wrong the way they always did: disorganization, missed deadlines, the voice in her head beating her up and telling her all the horrible things other people must think of her. You are weak. Like always. A little heat shouldn't be able to affect you this much. Get off your ass and get your work done. Maybe you aren't as smart as you think you are. Why would anyone want to get to know you anyway?

These moods weren't new. She had known that she had these emotional issues for a long time. She had even talked to her mom about them, hoping to get some professional help. "Sure, we will call someone and set something up," her mom had said. But nothing happened. And it seemed like the school didn't do anything about emotional stuff unless you had some kind of official diagnosis. So, she just ended up dealing with it herself.

She hated getting-to-know-you activities like this presentation. She didn't see the point. She didn't believe you could really 100% know another person. The version of yourself that you put out, that was what other people saw. It seemed like people themselves weren't perfect, but they could make a perfect version of themselves for other people to see. Except, she knew she wasn't perfect—she wished she could be, but she just didn't have it in her. And it felt like she couldn't control the version of herself that others saw. They just saw whatever they saw. She felt like the version of herself that she put out was always sort of fumbling and stumbling, doing things wrong. She didn't believe that was who she was at her core, but she didn't really know how to get herself out. She felt completely unable to share her passion for music or art with her friends for fear of being vulnerable. She loved these things so much, but she saw so many flaws in them, she was sure that others would see the flaws, too. If people she cared about saw the flaws in the work that she cared about, it would be devastating. So, the version of herself that people saw was usually pretty warped. It's not like they will see the real me, if I do this presentation. What is the point? I'm not truly unique to the point where anyone will notice me.

By a few weeks into school, some of Finn's optimism is gone. The obstacles she has always faced in school are still there. She has not found a way to set high expectations for herself that still allow for imperfection. When she fails to meet these extremely high expectations, it destroys her motivation and compounds her underachievement. However, this doesn't cause her to believe that her self-set expectations are incorrect in the moment when she experiences failure.

She is extremely aware of her physical surroundings, and these affect her mood. She believes that she should be able to will herself to greater motivation, and that she is too sensitive, that the extent to which she is affected by little things is a character flaw. But it is one she feels helpless to change. This triggers negative self-talk, a constant bullying voice in her head. She believes this voice and it helps to set her reality. She occasionally gets to the point where she becomes aware that it may be giving her an exaggerated, distorted view of herself and her relationship to the world, at which point she may try to stop listening or may argue with it, but she doesn't have the resources to be successful in this battle all on her own, at least not at this point in her life. Positive feedback from teachers or others—like when she sells a piece of artwork from her Etsy site—can beat the voice back for a time, but this protection doesn't last, and then she is trapped back inside where it can continue its abuse.

Finn gets anxious in social situations and is more comfortable disappearing. School is fundamentally a social setting. Activities that highlight this, rather than helping to build her social skills, trigger negative self-talk, preying on her low opinion of her likeability and social significance. Her awareness that this is probably not normal becomes another weapon for her negative inner voice, and she believes that she is both invisible because she is not unique enough to be noticed and so different from those around her that she will never truly fit in, hiding behind a poorly manufactured façade that is barely passable in society and is under constant threat of being broken. She knows she needs help, has even asked for it, but has been left feeling unheard and unsupported.

She feels a lack of connection and common ground with others and their realities, believes that this is inevitable, and so is fundamentally cut off from the social support system that should be provided by her peers. She actively hides things from them, including her creative strengths. To expose the things she loves so much, her areas of greatest strengths, to others she knows and to possibly experience their misunderstanding or criticism, is too great a risk.

Anecdote 26: F. Finn waited for Mr. Veris to arrive. They had scheduled a meeting to talk about her plans for orchestra next year. She was in the top orchestra at the school—had been since the beginning of high school. That was good. It meant that, unlike in middle school, where half of class was spent trying to get people to behave, she could actually learn something. It seemed like most of her classes were full of students who didn't want to learn, and all the teacher's attention went to getting those students to some minimum standard. That meant that no one had time to help those who already knew stuff learn more. She needed that level of individualization. She didn't want to be in a lower orchestra, where people wouldn't focus on the important stuff.

Things had gotten so competitive this year, though. She had been moved down several chair positions, and so she ended up playing too loud in order to be heard. Yet, Mr. Veris didn't seem to notice this. That just made it worse. You are messing up in front of everyone, her inner voice said. Everyone can see it. You just can't keep up. He doesn't even bother to try and get you to blend anymore. I would have given up on you by now if I were your teacher. It just made her play worse.

Mr. Veris arrived and opened his office, escorting her inside. She took the seat he indicated, and they made small talk for a minute before getting to the topic at hand.

"Finn, I was disappointed to hear that you don't plan to audition for orchestra next year," Mr. Veris said. "I don't really understand why. You are a junior this year; you've been playing with us for three years. With your knowledge and abilities, you will be fine."

Finn was quiet for a moment. It sometimes took a moment to compose just what she wanted to say. "Things have gotten so competitive. I've been losing chair position all year—"

“Chair position is not just about skill,” Mr. Veris interrupted. “It is also about how the instruments sound together and getting the right balance. You shouldn’t take it personally.”

“I know, I just . . .” Finn replied, having lost some of her reply when she was interrupted. You shouldn’t take it personally. You are too sensitive. Professional cellists don’t give up so easily. If you worked harder, this wouldn’t be happening to you. But you are just weak. “I don’t think I’m going to get into the orchestra that I want, so I don’t think I will audition.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. You can at least try, and then, if you don’t get in, you can decide what to do.”

Finn had started the meeting nervous and upset. Now she didn’t seem to be getting her feelings across at all. It made sense to her. Why couldn’t she explain it better? “I can’t do it!” she said. “I’m just so scared!” She started to cry. Mr. Veris looked on, bewildered, not sure what to do to help her.

By the beginning of second semester, Finn’s difficulties with her negative self-talk have caused her to make a decision that could be detrimental to her future creativity, and possibly job choices. She loves and has benefitted from the skill-based leveling system in high school orchestra. It has meant that she is in a level of class where the teacher can focus on high goals, understanding, achievement, and musicality, unlike her experiences in middle school where the teacher had to focus on getting lower level students to behave, concentrate, and meet a standard far below what Finn wanted to achieve. Orchestra has been a positive influence throughout most of her high school experience.

Her negative self-talk, lack of confidence, and general feelings of vulnerability in any situation where her endeavors will be judged (such as auditioning for orchestra and chair placement for next year) have led her to convince herself that she has already failed (in this case, failed to maintain her position in the school’s top orchestra). Rather than suffer what to her feels like the public humiliation of being downgraded to the middle

level orchestra (something that is by no means guaranteed to happen—in fact, her orchestra teacher has tried to hint that it will not), she has taken what little control of the situation she feels she still has and protected herself by stepping away from the challenge and the threat altogether.

She has played cello for five years, dedicating large amounts of time each week to improving her skills and received the rare honor of being placed in the top orchestra during her freshman year. It brings her great enjoyment, calm, and comfort. Yet she is choosing to give it up entirely rather than risk public negative judgement. The optimism of the beginning of the year is now totally gone.

George. George is a senior this year. He was adopted into a family with three grown children. George was born with ADHD and had other learning issues. He has worked hard and has moved from an IEP to a 504.

***Anecdote 27: G.** George was looking forward to science class today. He would be working in a group with the two friends he had in class, and that always seemed to make the time go faster. Plus, he felt more relaxed and like he learned better when there was some kind of interaction and projects, instead of just tests. Getting his work done made him feel like he had done his job, and this kind of project was the kind he liked—no lecture, working with friends, a chance to learn by bouncing ideas off others, and they could help him when he had trouble with the terminology.*

He put his backpack under his chair and looked up at the board. “Poster presentations due next class,” it said at the top. Ms. Billings quieted the class after the bell rang, then started to go over the agenda for the day. “I have decided to switch things up a bit from what I told you last class,” she began. “This is a smaller class than I usually get, so, to cover all of the material we need to with our posters, I have decided that you will be presenting individually. You can still work with others to help on some of the general stuff, but I expect each student to be ready to present on his or her topic by the beginning of next class. You will draw topics out of this bag.” She wandered around the room and student after student drew a small piece of paper out of the bag.

George slumped in his seat as she moved around the other side of the room. He could feel his heart rate increase as she got closer, and he felt vaguely ill. He didn't mind presenting in front of the class if he was up there with other people but presenting in front of everyone when he was all alone it was different, especially in a class where he only knew a few people. It was the same as when he took tests. He would get nervous and all the information would fly out of his head. Also, with a whole topic to himself, he would not get done in class, and would have to work on it at home. Ms. Billings didn't let them take the textbook home from this class, so he would have to either get all the info today and do the poster entirely at home, or he would have to find his own information resources, something he knew he wasn't good at, even though he had decent internet at home. It was always so hard to sift through what was there and find what you needed. Why couldn't they have just stuck to the old plan?

As mentioned in the anecdotes with George's parents, George is a near-miss for underachievement. He is twice exceptional, both gifted in his twirling, and learning disabled in other areas. He has been included in the study as a useful counterpoint, helping to show what is and what is not part of the experience of the underachievement of creatively gifted students (van Manen, 1990, p. 122). George's experiences of school and achievement/underachievement are both similar and different compared to the experiences of the other student participants in this study. George finds the presentation anxiety in academic settings is lessened if he can present in a group. Anxiety about presenting in front of a class is common in the student participants, particularly in classes where the students don't know their classmates well. Like most others in performing groups, for George, this anxiety is present in academic class situations and does not occur for activities centered around a favored creative endeavor, or, at least, it is not experienced in a negative way.

George expresses an overall positive view of school, confidence in his ability to learn, and his ability to get work done on time. Though he experiences worry about

successfully finishing his work if he knows that he will have to complete some of it at home, he doesn't question the necessity of the work itself. Instead, he immediately begins thinking of how to accomplish it within the limitations of resources, time, and his rate of work. Completing his assignments makes him feel like he is doing his job. The other study participants question the tasks they are given. These "jobs" are treated with skepticism, and these students lack the sense of ownership ("my job") that George expresses, though some of them feel that they should feel the way George does about school work. While the other students have confidence in their intelligence and ability to learn, they have strong doubts about their abilities to keep track of work and complete it well in a timely fashion.

The change from one plan to another is also a source of stress. He had expected class to go one way, and instead, it went another, into an area that exposed some of his weaknesses rather than exploiting his strengths. Most of the participants in this study expressed some need or desire for transition time in the face of unexpected change, many perceiving that they needed more time than their peers, who didn't seem as phased by these types of changes. Lack of such transition time could trigger negative self-talk, or internal or overt lashing out at whatever authority imposed the change. Though George experiences anxiety and some skepticism that he will be as successful with the changes the teacher has announced, he does not attack himself or the teacher, either internally or externally. The change is a momentary set-back, not an indictment of himself, his abilities, the system, or anyone else. It is a bump to be dealt with as best he can. He is unhappy with the situation, not completely de-motivated or helpless.

***Anecdote 28: G.** George packed up his uniform for the last time this season. Marching band was over for the year, but that meant his work was just starting. The competition season for twirling was about to get underway.*

He liked twirling for marching band. It was fun to be near the front of the Homecoming parade, when they shut down several streets in town and everyone came out to cheer and throw candy. He was the only male twirler on the team, and it made him feel unique. He knew that in some places he would be teased for it, but he never felt that way here. His friends and family always supported him, and he was good at it! Five years of ballet and twirling practice, and his new classes in hip hop, helped him feel confident.

But it wasn't truly about marching band. It was the competition season—the twirling competition season, not the band competition season—that was what he really loved. He practiced at least an hour a day in the spring and summer, plus dance lessons, which he couldn't go to during band season. He was looking forward to spending time with the others at the studio and seeing how well he could do in competition this year.

Yes, band was great, but it would be so cool if they offered dance as a PE class at school. That would be perfect.

George has both similar and different experiences than the other student participants in the study. His creativity is focused on a single activity (twirling), and the other creative activities he engages in (dance) are in support of this one area of endeavor. Though he considers himself an introvert, George feels socially accepted and comfortable with his peers, receiving active support from them. The anxiety he feels when presenting in front of others in class is not present when in marching band or in individual competition. He believes in his skills and his ability to improve them with practice, which he enjoys. Other students in the study also mention being excited and nervous before creative (nonacademic) performances, but not anxious. For George, this confidence extends into individual creative work, and he does well in individual twirling competition settings as well as in the group setting of marching band. Many of the other participants still have difficulty producing or performing in their individual creative endeavors,

experiencing struggles with perfectionism or difficulty with getting started. This is not the case for George. He believes in his ability to do well in twirling, whereas he is less sure in academic performance settings.

George does not feel the same level of isolation from his peers that other participants expressed. While all the students in the study consider themselves introverts and tend to have small groups of friends, George seems more confident in these relationships and more at ease in general about who others perceive him to be. This is somewhat surprising, as anti-LGBT sentiment is fairly strong among a contingent of the school and community, and, since twirling is an activity associated most strongly with girls, his prominent position as the only male twirler at the school featured in all half-time shows during football and in many other band performances could be expected to expose him to at least some assumptions about his sexual orientation and the common resultant negative interaction with peers. He maintains that he has never had negative feedback from peers for his performances and choices, and instead tells me that he has been given unwavering support.

He has had positive feedback on his creative endeavors, beginning to use them at the professional level (teaching), and he and his family consider twirling and teaching twirling as a possible future job, or even a career. While others in the study may perceive their creative endeavors as possible career avenues, most experience anxiety about their own abilities, lack of support for their creative careers at school or at home, or both. While George has been approached by colleges to join their twirling teams on scholarship, he and his family are leaning toward a community college with a twirling

team, at least for his first two years after graduation, so that he can see if he likes college and can have more time before committing to a career path.

These snapshots are intended to give a holistic picture of experiences of creativity and underachievement for individual study participants. Participants reviewed their anecdotes and the subsequent discussions and refined them through co-creative interactions with me to ensure they accurately represented their experiences. In the next four chapters, I will present these experiences through the lenses of creativity, motivation, sense of student self, and power, using the existential filters of lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived relationships. I will also tie these experiences into relevant literature.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE LENS OF CREATIVITY

Phenomenology attempts to pinpoint lived experience, giving readers a chance to understand in both an empathetic and thoughtful way the essence of an experience they may never have had. In Chapter 4, I presented holistic narrative snapshots of the experience of the underachievement of creatively gifted high school students from three main points of view, that of the student, that of the teacher, and that of the parent. Each of these views was multifaceted, containing the experiences of six individuals or sets of individuals in each of these categories. This presentation has begun to create a wide-angle view—a photo-collage of the entire experience. Each anecdote presented the experience as a whole from a specific point of view at a specific place and time.

I will now begin to tease apart these wholes into their component parts. Consider the metaphor of the photograph. The photographer (in this case, the study participant) can see an experience from an individual point of view. Point of view is the first way a photographer directs attention. I will now introduce the idea of a choice of lens also shaping this photo. The lenses I will use are the themes that emerged in the data, from interviews, observations, and journal entries. In photography, the choice of lens helps shape the viewer's attention and experience of the photograph, directing a person to notice specific aspects of the scene. So, too, will these emergent themes. The themes that emerged over the course of the study are creativity, motivation, sense of student self, and power.

In addition to a lens, a photographer may add a filter to further focus attention and emphasize certain aspects of a scene. Phenomenology provides our four existential filters: lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived relationships. I will apply each of these filters to each theme/lens, and each lens will be used from each point of view. First, we will explore our scene, the underachievement of creatively gifted high school students, through the lens of creativity, using each filter, and from each point of view. This composite picture will begin to show the phenomenon in great depth.

Terminology

I encountered a conundrum when choosing language with which to refer to the student participants in the study. Each term I attempted to use is loaded with positionality or social connotations that imply connections that are not significant in all circumstances, and they often have unintended multiple meanings. The term “child,” while it may be technically accurate, gives the impression of a much younger individual than those at the heart of this study. These adolescents surely do not view themselves as children, at least not all the time. Many are faced with adult ideas, decisions, and situations on a regular basis. In the end, I decided to use the terms “child” and “children” only to indicate their relation to their parents, for though, as a middle-aged woman, I am certainly no longer a child, I am still my parent’s child. This term is, therefore, only intended to refer to this direct relationship.

I considered the term adolescent. However, this term has many culturally negative connotations, including an overall feeling that decisions made by adolescents are not well-thought-out, or in some way not as valid as the experiences and decisions of the

adults who surround them. As part of the intention of this study is to make sure to value the voices and experiences of its high school aged participants, I quickly decided that the term “adolescent” was counter-productive.

I rejected the terms young man/young woman as too clunky and gender-specific. High school student and young adult were likewise rejected on the grounds that they interrupt the flow of language. This left me with the term “student,” which is the one I will use most often.

“Student” is defined as “a person engaged in study” (Oxford University, 1971, p. 3107). “Study,” in one of its root forms, *stode*, comes close to our modern understanding of the word study in English: “application of the mind to the acquisition of learning; mental labor, reading and reflection directed to learning, literary composition, invention, or the like” (Oxford University, 1971, p. 3108). The term student is not gender-specific. It does not imply a level of maturity or lack thereof. It is accurate, as all participants were students at the time of data collection. Finally, though not all experiences affecting underachievement and creativity were directly related to a young person’s role as a student, underachievement in the context of this study deals, primarily, with how a student interacts with a school system. Also, an older meaning from the Latin *studium* is sometimes translated as “affection, friendliness, devotion to another’s welfare; partisan sympathy; desire, inclination; pleasure or interest felt in something” (Oxford University, 1971, p. 3107). All these aspects of being a student are key to the experiences of these participants.

The terms “parent” and “teacher” were likewise chosen, not to encapsulate the entirety of these individuals’ experiences, but rather to delimit the edges of the experiences within the scope of the study. No matter how interesting their lives are beyond these roles, it is their experiences in these roles as they relate to the students that I wish to explore.

Phenomenology attempts to reveal what is singular in experience, but also what is essential to a particular experience (van Manen, 2014). I will therefore compress each point of view to that of “our teachers,” “our parents,” and “our students” and use the plural pronoun “they” when experiences are common among participants from each of these group points of view, while using specific attributed quotes to give clarifying examples and unique, specific experiences that will help make vivid the lived experience. This combining of viewpoints is not intended to imply that experience or findings are generalizable, but rather to help convey that these experiences are possible to anyone in these roles (van Manen, 1990).

I will use the following codes when citing quotes from the various participants throughout the rest of the study.

Table 2

Participant Codes

Students	Parents	Teachers
A = Abby	H = Hazel, Abby's mother	RS = Roger Starbucks, a band teacher
S = Steve	El = Elizabeth, Steve's mother	SJ = Samantha Johnson, a math teacher
B = Bella	G = Gene, Bella's father; K = Katie, Bella's mother	HL = Helen Lesterman, an English teacher
O = Otto	E = Edward, Otto's father; T = Teri, Otto's mother	CS = Cody Slade, a social studies teacher
F = Finn	M = Megan, Finn's mother	FB = Faith Billings, a consumer and family sciences (FACs) teacher
G = George	J = John, George's father; Ml = Melody, George's mother	NH = Nadia Hook, a biology teacher

Creativity

As discussed in Chapter 2, creativity consists of ideas that are original and appropriate/useful (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013; Sternberg, 2012). Creative individuals display traits such as divergent thinking, playfulness, risk-taking, heightened aesthetic awareness, extreme focus on interest areas (sometimes to the exclusion of other subjects), and the ability to see connections across content areas (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011; Nickerson, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Not all these traits are valued in the classroom, and some may be seen as detrimental to classroom order and efficiency (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Yeung et al., 2005). While pursuit of creative activities is inherently rewarding for creative individuals (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), the fact that attention is a limited resource can contribute to the

negative perception of creative individuals as they may choose to allocate attention in different ways than others deem appropriate (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, p. 10). Kim (2008) and Yeung et al. (2005) postulate that a mismatch between school environment and creative personality traits may lead to underachievement in creative students.

I will use creativity as one lens through which to explicate the experience of the underachievement of creatively gifted high school students. The experience of this phenomenon is primarily an experience of the student, but it happens in the adult shaped context of school achievement. Therefore, I will explore the teacher and parent experiences of student creativity first, to give context to the student experience.

The Teacher Experience of Student Creativity

Creativity and time. Our teachers have a clear understanding that creativity is intimately connected with time. They know that creativity is time consuming because it involves mess, risk-taking, freedom to pursue mistakes down blind alleys, and to then problem-solve one's way out to a workable solution. It also requires a baseline of expertise so that creative thinking and risk-taking can build forward, rather than being held back by technical difficulties. As Roger stated,

RS: I always tell them that if they want to be an average player, they're going to practice three times a week for like 30 minutes to 45 minutes, and if they want to be a good player, then they're going to practice five days a week, 45 minutes to an hour, and if they want to be the top player, they're going to practice six or seven days a week for an hour plus, at least.

Our teachers feel that creativity, creative thinking, and creative problem solving are in direct conflict with the idea of one correct answer and one way to reach that answer (or even a "best" way to reach that answer). They feel that giving too much structure to

students in helping them achieve success undermines their ability to find answers for themselves—their ability to think creatively and independently. However, our teachers feel pressure to give this kind of structure as it speeds the rate at which students plow through curricula, even as it may rob them of depth of understanding and retention.

NH: I feel like [labs] are probably more structured than I would like them to be, because we have to run through the material so quickly, so getting them that background information, and having it where they have enough background information to do that would take a long time.

Our teachers feel that using this level of structure teaches students to expect a “right way” to do things, and that they then expect our teachers to provide this failure-free path, particularly the high-achieving students who may focus on their grades more than other students do.

SJ: I see [perfectionism] more often in the advanced classes, with my less creative students, actually. I’ve noticed that my more creative students are a little more okay with taking some chances and flailing a little bit, and that’s an okay thing for them. But some of my more linear thinkers, they understand where their target is, and they think there is only one way to get there, and that perfectionism definitely gets hold of them.

Implied in this statement is an assumption that creative, nonlinear thinkers are less likely to be in advanced classes. Faith Billings talks about the positive effect she sees in letting students thrive in the less structured environment she provides in her catering class, “I think just because there is a little less structure and they’re not being hounded on all the time, do it this way, do it this way, do it this way, there’s a little more flexibility, and they seem to like that.”

Our teachers demonstrate their own creativity—and their desire to exercise more creativity in lessons and in student activities—regularly. They feel that the state- and

department-mandated breadth of material is in opposition to their own and our students' ability to use creativity to learn, as well as to learn how to be creative. Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) agree that "curriculum races" (p. 48), as they call them, do not provide time for deep, meaningful learning. Class size exacerbates this problem, as it limits time our teachers have to learn student strengths and individualize instruction to student needs. Our teachers feel that time constraints actively discourage creativity in the classroom. Marcus and Oldham (2006) have found that (at least in work settings) excessive time pressure is detrimental to creativity, particularly in situations where creativity is not supported by the culture of the site.

Creativity and space. Our teachers experience creativity and space in several ways. They see how the school space encourages and discourages creativity, how they attempt to cultivate creativity with how they use space in their own classrooms, and also how particular curricular subjects promote or quash creativity. At the study site, specific subjects are taught in specific, consistent places (for the most part), so issues that relate to the nature of how a subject affects participant experience of school are, at least in part, spatial issues. Band space and Social Studies space feel different because the room shapes how our students are taught, but also because the subject shapes how the room is decorated, arranged, and used.

Our teachers worry that school in general is not a creativity-friendly space. Nadia Hook stated, "I find that the really creative minds tend to not do as well [in school]." Cody Slade said,

CS: I think that if a student wants to be more creative, it can be challenging for them to do that, and so I think that can translate into underachievement. But then, on the other side of it, there is something to be said about [how] underachievement can manifest itself in a lack of creativity, because it is hard work to be creative. You have to think, by definition, you have to think differently than most everybody else is thinking, and that is not easy to do.

Our teachers experience creativity as both a fixed internal trait, and as a trait that can be affected by the space in which the students exist. Our teachers see our creative students as sometimes less able to function in the rules- and compliance-bound space of school than more typical students. Seen this way, creativity is a fixed trait. Our teachers wonder if schools make students less creative by undervaluing creativity, all the while trying to find ways to nurture creativity in students. Seen this way, creativity is a mutable trait.

Our teachers' view of creativity's effect on underachievement is likewise dichotomous: on one hand, creativity can contribute to underachievement, and on the other, it takes lots of work, so in some ways it is viewed as antithetical to underachievement. This dichotomy is a result of shifting definitions of underachievement: on one hand, our teachers see underachievement as low grades and low compliance with school-imposed benchmarks; on the other hand, they consider underachievement to be lazy and dishonest behavior that lowers a student's ability to understand, connect with, and retain real learning. Our teachers feel that compliance-based teaching, assessment, and student behaviors—referred to as hoop-jumping by students, teachers, and parents alike—leads to shallow learning. Sousa and Tomlinson

(2011) agree. However, our teachers feel time and relational pressures to use compliance-based teaching and assessment.

Our teachers see spaces that emphasize compliance and closed-ended, step-by-step completion of tasks as hostile to creativity and creative students, while spaces that emphasize open-ended thinking, problem solving, and iteration are creativity-friendly places of deeper learning. Our teachers feel a yearning to make their classrooms conform to the latter template but feel pressure to teach in the former template. Nadia stated,

NH: I would prefer to have more creativity, and I feel like I don't get that chance a lot, for the students, and myself as well. I have these ideas of changing my room into what we were talking about. I've thought about lots of different things I could do; it's just energy and time, and materials sometimes.

Our teachers feel that a disconnect between achievement (getting good grades) and learning (understanding and remembering content and being able to think clearly and deeply) can make individual classrooms or school as a whole an unfriendly place for some students.

NH: I find that the really creative minds tend to not do as well [in school] ... I appreciate those students so much. I feel like they are trying to express themselves and learn. I feel like they have a little bit more of that love of learning, and they ask more questions usually.

Our teachers see this affect motivation and have a direct impact on achievement. Cody said, "I think that the traditional model in a class like a Social Science class, Natural Science, Math, English ... discourages creativity. It discourages divergent thinking."

By rewarding compliance to structure, school can encourage students to lower the level of their learning, motivation, curiosity, and interest (Kim, 2008). Are we structuring classes so that students are rewarded for the hard work of their creativity, or are we

discouraging them from trying this by making it too much of a risk? If students choose to value their learning and exploration of creativity over compliance, are they penalized, or given the opportunity to grow in unexpected directions? Faith said,

FB: It seems like the ones that are super-creative do not thrive in a super-structured academic realm where there is “This is the only way you can do it,” and “This is the only way you can get the answer,” because they see so many different avenues to get somewhere, that it bogs them down.

Our teachers want to do something about this and may be somewhat successful in increasing open-ended thinking and problem solving in their space, while reducing step-by-dictated-step completion of tasks. Unsurprisingly, the Catering classroom was built around this type of learning and teaching. But math, also, becomes a creativity friendly space in Samantha Johnson’s hands. Students are allowed to try different ways of solving a problem, uncovering underlying concepts through iteration, in a space where inquiry and risk are encouraged, and failure after a risk is not punished.

SJ: I think it is honestly the way that the standards have changed to allow kids to be more creative, instead of this drill and kill and forcing them to memorize formulas, we’re really thinking about how they think about math instead. I just think that transition has naturally allowed kids to be more creative.

Corporeal creativity. To understand student creativity, our teachers draw on the experience of their own creativity. This is particularly true in corporeal experiences of creativity. Creativity is experienced corporeally through the senses. It is experienced in movement. It is experienced in hormonal responses triggering emotional reactions, which manifest physically in heart rate, body temperature, pupil dilation, etc. (Damasio, 1999). Our teachers look at their own experiences of creativity to empathize with the student experience of creativity as they watch them unfold in their classroom.

Our teachers see lesson planning as a major outlet for creativity. They use words such as “ownership,” “excited,” “passion,” “getting it,” and “freedom,” when discussing both their own and student experiences of creativity. They equate these feelings with activities such as “problem solving,” “divergent thinking,” “humor,” and “choice.” Our teachers understand that some creative traits and behaviors, such as problem finding, playfulness, and autonomy (Davis et al., 2011), lead to the felt rewards of creativity such as passion, ownership, and other indicators of intrinsic motivation (Czikszentmihalyi, 1990).

I found this to be a strange contrast to some activities our teachers use in class that are considered creative. Nadia allows students to design a cover page for a unit in a science notebook. Cody lets them choose how to color a map rather than using a map program’s pre-settings. These activities acknowledge only the aesthetic component of creativity and ignore the question-finding and problem-solving aspect of creative thinking (Davis, 2003). They feel somehow related to the situation, without really addressing the underlying issue. These activities do not excite passion or promote a sense of freedom and ownership (Collins & Amabile, 1999), at least with this age level. Letting a 5-year-old choose between a red and a green crayon is very different from presenting the same choice to a 16-year-old, who sees that, perhaps, he or she would like to use copper wire and solder instead—but that choosing to do so might lead to a loss of points. Some, but not all, teachers in this study are aware of the difference between genuinely creative explorations of content that use aesthetics to help students engage and aesthetic band-aids that cover the lack of opportunity to engage in divergent thinking and risk-taking. Those

who are aware have a desire for more time for creative activities or want to go even further, trying to find a way to make creativity more overtly valued in school.

The aesthetics of a space and activity should not be ignored in this context. These aesthetic cues communicate to the senses, the body, and to memory associations (Damasio, 1999). Several participants (students and parents) discussed how incorporating aesthetic cues throughout a room that signal that it is a creativity-friendly space can do a lot to help a student feel safe in taking creative risks. Cues like this are prevalent in our teachers' classroom. A DNA chain made of construction paper hangs from the ceiling of Nadia's classroom, and boxes of colored pencils, scissors, and glue are easily accessible, a promise of hands-on activities to come. Cody's classroom has posters of bands he likes. Faith's kitchen stations, while scrupulously clean, are well-labeled and organized so students have easy access to needed materials without having to depend on a teacher as gatekeeper, thus giving them both choice and freedom.

Our teachers grapple directly with how best to help students feel creative in the classroom. Helen Lesterman said,

HL: I think writing is creative. Even a boring five paragraph essay has some creativity, but particularly creative writing and poetry. I'm afraid that those things don't feel creative to kids, maybe just because it's an English assignment, something that they have to do. But man, a well-done piece of writing is awesome. They created something. There was a blank sheet of paper, and now there's something awesome there. ... I think the writing kids, who are gifted with writing and then have that creative spark, can just do amazing things with their writing, but again, would they recognize that? Because it's not something you hang up on the wall for everyone to see. It looks kind of boring from a distance, right? It's white paper with black text or whatever.

Creativity and relationships. Our teachers see creativity as a fragile, valuable thing that takes time and hard work to cultivate and attain. They see that certain practices are in place throughout the school system that can cause students to have to choose between creativity and compliance, which can often be a choice between creativity and achievement. They are very aware of the responsibility they have to their students' creativity when they relate to their students.

Our teachers feel the impact their relationships with our students have on creativity. The amount of freedom or structure our teachers (and previous teachers with whom the students have had contact) provide or impose during activities has an impact. Our teachers see an abundance of structure as counterproductive to creativity, forcing students to choose between compliance and engagement. As Faith stated,

FB: My sense over the years is they have been told, "No, you can't do it that way. Oh, no, you can't do it that way. Oh, no, that's not the right way." And they haven't been given that freedom to produce the product their way, and so yeah, by the time they get to probably third grade, then they're like, "Ah, hmm. Nah. I'll do what the teacher says, but ... it's not challenging me. It's not doing what I like."

Inherent in this student choice to comply or be creative is the role of our teachers as judge. Our teachers decide if what our students are doing helps learning, and whether the work that our students produce demonstrate understanding of the material being taught. Samantha said,

SJ: I think you have to be really careful to not pass on any—not even let them perceive that you have any—judgment. For instance in my Advanced Geometry classes, I have a lot of nontraditional thinkers in there, as far as the math room goes, and I think it's amazing, and I think you have to be really careful to let them go on their tangent and let them not be afraid to make a mistake, because in reality, they have some of the most interesting ways of getting at things, and

they're probably going to have some of the best understanding of whatever skill you're teaching, and so I just think you have to be really careful with that and accept where they're going, and I guess give them the time so you can see where it goes.

Their attitude of suspending judgement to allow risk-taking and failure is key to promoting creativity (Baum et al., 1995).

Our teachers find that having students work in groups is helpful for creative activities (in contrast to the experience of our students), which is in line with findings in the literature (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, and Staw., 2005; Mizrahi, 2015). Roger Starbucks described how students playing well as a group inspire each other:

RS: You can have 100 great musicians that make a mediocre group, or you can have 100 mediocre players, but as a group they make an awesome ensemble, just because of the way they work together, and the way they are jelling.

Faith has all catering students work in teams to get work done and assist each other.

Helen's students work in pairs to help each other's writing. Group work is not only a popular movement in teaching (Robinson, 2003), our teachers believe it helpful in promoting creativity specifically.

Our students see group work as a chance for social mistakes and negative judgement from peers, a time when they are acutely conscious of feeling different, being perceived as bossy, or having a lower grade because they are not in control of the process or finished product. Our teachers see group work as a chance to pool resources, have students help each other, build on each other's ideas, and use social engagement as well as verbal processing to increase motivation and engagement, and finally lead to a higher quality finished product. Amabile et al. (2005) also mentions that novelty is easier to

generate when multiple points of view and experiences are pooled, providing opportunities for a synthesis of ideas. Eisner (1998) argues for iterating ideas and sharing these iterations as a way of refining them and generating further ideas. While our students are also aware of some of these benefits, they are generally more conscious of the drawbacks of group work than of its benefits, particularly if group work has the added stressor of a grade. This disconnect in perception of the value of group work is an area where our teachers could change their practice to help those who underachieve in group work.

The Parent Experience of Student Creativity

Creativity and time. Our parents experience their child's creativity as time consuming. They see our students spending hours and hours to perfect skills that may or may not be school related but that are clearly a high priority for the child. Melody talked about how much time George spent practicing twirling and traveling for competitions.

MI: He's been invited to [a competition] out in Maryland [that] he's going to the week before spring break. He's going to go for a couple days. I'm not happy with pulling him out of school, but we're doing it, for a day. But he was invited to it, and so we're like okay, we're going to have you go.

Finn's mother Megan mentioned, "On the weekends it could be six, seven hours on that kind of thing. A couple hours on the weekdays, that she's not doing homework." In both cases, the time-consuming nature of creative activities sometimes puts these activities at odds with schoolwork. The limited resource of time makes creativity an issue of priorities: what activities are valued highly enough for them to take precedence, and what activities have a lower value and so should be given less time?

Our parents may assign a wide range of priority level to student creative endeavors and are definitely aware of the tug-of-war on student time between school and creative activity. They may experience conflict themselves as to what should hold priority and in what circumstances.

Our parents clearly value their child's creativity and have many ways to show this. George's family supports his twirling through private lessons, presence at competitions, and the time and expenditure of frequent travel to more challenging competitions out of state. Hazel's home is full of artwork created by her three children. It sits on counters, hangs framed on the walls, and she even hides her daughter's finished origami sculptures from her so that she won't take them apart to use the "bricks" to make new sculptures. Bella's parents express the value they place on creativity through their everyday activities, from Katie's writing to Gene's creation of their new house, incorporating design input from all family members.

Our parents may also feel conflicted about the level of priority to give creativity, and this may or may not reflect their own priorities for themselves. George's parents don't consider themselves to be creative but can separate this from their support of George's creativity. Finn's mother worried "I do think [creativity] distracts her away [from schoolwork]." This worry is in direct conflict with her view of herself as Finn's "patron of the arts." Bella's parents were at a loss for how to motivate her to make school a priority, so her love of music became a tool:

K: We made her not take jazz band. We told her she had to get all As, Bs, and Cs or no jazz band. We're not taking her out of symphonic band. We didn't take her out of marching band, we didn't take her out of pep band, just no jazz band.

Otto's family clearly places schoolwork as more important than drawing, equating drawing with other activities they consider time wasters.

E: It would be a computer. It would be an Xbox. It would be a phone. He will read. He will draw, stuff like that, but ... if you just sat back and you didn't regulate anything, that's what he would do. For hours, and he can spend hours and hours.

The fact that creative endeavors are time consuming, and that students and their parents may have different priorities for time use, can be a source of conflict. Our parents feel the need to teach their child to prioritize what our parents think is important, and how to make good choices about use of time. Our students may hold different priorities than our parents and come to resent the imposed priorities that contradict their own. Or, they may experience a conflict within about whether to prioritize what our parents want or what our students feel, not necessarily realizing that this is at the heart of their decision about how to spend their time, leading to paralysis and inability to decide to do anything.

Creativity and space. Our parents may be completely cognizant of the impact of space on their child's creativity, or may be less aware, even if they use space as a tool for influencing their child toward the priority of schoolwork over that of creative activities. They see that the impact of space on creativity is closely tied with how safe a space feels. Our parents' intuitions about space and creativity have uncovered patterns supported by research. If the space is one that allows our students to relax, feel protected from negative judgement, welcomed, and loved, and if it is a space associated with previous successes, it is creative friendly (Amabile et al., 2005; Baum et al., 1995). If a child fears judgement,

failure, and social ostracization in a space, the space is hostile to creativity (Yeung et al., 2005). Our parents see this play out both in school and at home.

Katie gives a description of a school space that Bella liked and a teacher who was an immediate good match for Bella.

K: When you walked into her classroom, [she] had a tablecloth covered little table with a lamp, had a reading corner with the puffy chairs. ... You walked into a little oasis, a little comfort zone, and that was the way her whole class was. If she has a teacher like that, she is good to go.

Deliberate attention was paid to the aesthetic aspects of welcome and comfort in the space described. Bella did far less well with a teacher and a space that was clean, hard-lined, and perfectly organized.

George “started [twirling] in a place where he was safe, and everybody gave him that [respect and love], and he just moved into the high school, and by that point he was comfortable, and he didn’t really care.” Melody feels that this early success and acceptance gave him the strength to persevere in twirling at the high school where students are more judgmental.

Our parents may make deliberate choices to help the home space fit our students, allowing our students to have input on paint colors and other design choices in their own room, or even throughout the house. But communal spaces, such as a kitchen table designated as a homework space, may be less private, are more likely to be a place of judgment, and so are less creativity friendly.

Corporeal creativity. Our parents experience the corporeal aspects of their child’s creativity in various ways. Our students’ corporeal creativity impacts our parents’

senses directly when they see, hear, read, or taste the creation. Our parents experience some sense of delight and pride, both in the creation itself and in the joy that the activity obviously brings to the child. Hazel said, “She is incredibly creative. ... She is just a talented little girl. ...It makes her happy which makes me happy.”

Our students’ creative endeavors impact our parents’ movements, transporting the child to lessons, coordinating schedules, and attending events. Equipment or clothing must be found and purchased, teachers outside of the school system found for extracurricular lessons or coaching, and sometimes trips to museums and performances of other artists to cultivate and participate in our students’ interests with them.

But our parents also experience our students’ creativity as an outsider. They observe how creative activities change our students’ experience of the world, shaping who they are, and this impacts how our parents experience their child’s identity. Our parents see how creative classes in school have kept our students engaged with other parts of school. Megan said, “I think...[orchestra] has kind of been something that has kept her involved and interested in school.” They have seen how creative activities fully envelop our students’ attention. He or she is, according to Hazel, “in her own world” and Gene said, “she’ll really get into whatever it is.” Our parents are puzzled, amazed, and fascinated about this aspect of our students’ creativity, particularly if our students have difficulty focusing during other activities.

Creativity and relationships. Our parents experience creativity relationally with our students in several ways. As seen above, our parents may feel pride in our students’

accomplishments and joy in their joy. Our parents also experience creativity relationally as an area of commonality, as a point of tension, and as a source of risk.

Our parents may not consider themselves creative, or they may write fiction or poetry, make musical instruments and restore engines, or engage in general creative problem solving. Our parents may consider themselves “practical,” as Edward put it, using the term as a contrast to creativity. If our parents consider themselves creative, they use (or attempts to use) this as a jumping off point to empathize with what our students feel about their own creativity, its importance, and what it feels like to be drawn in to an activity. Despite this empathetic understanding of how important and consuming creative activities can be, our parents may still feel that obligations to school should take precedence when it comes to time use. When our students spend time on creative tasks instead of schoolwork, or when our parents attempt to control access to these activities in an effort to redirect student attention and effort, tension arises. At these times, creativity, rather than a source of joy, becomes a source of conflict.

Our parents experience creativity as a risk to our students when it interferes with priorities our parents value (such as grades and work completion). But they may see creative endeavors as inherently risky in and of themselves. Katie, in particular, spoke about her own experience that putting a creative work out into the world (in her case writing, in the case of her daughter, writing, music, and drawing) opens one up to judgement from others to a part of oneself that is delicate, precious, and vulnerable. Katie feared this judgement for herself and for her daughter.

Despite my expectations to the contrary, our parents do not express the fear that choosing a career in creative fields (particularly artistic fields) is a risk. While our students express this fear, and the fear that our parents would not approve of such a choice, our parents may actually have an expectation and outright support for this possibility. Our parents tend to be overtly supportive of their child's creative activities, when kept in what they consider proper balance with other priorities. Our parents believe that creative activities, especially music, promote engagement in school, self-discipline, the ability to work with and be relied on by others, and as a (sometimes badly needed) social outlet.

The Student Experience of Creativity

Creativity and time. Creativity is time consuming. Our students are likely to have three or more serious creative activities that they pursue with regularity for many hours a week, most of them devoting at least an hour a day to completely creative endeavors that are not school related. Bella, for instance, spends 15-16 hours of structured time in band and up to 3.5 hours practicing at home each week, as well as spending a significant amount of time writing fiction and drawing. Otto spends at least an hour a night drawing, spends time on his own reading books on anatomy and other sciences, and spends two hours a day playing soccer when it is in season, as well as coaching soccer over the summer. When given the opportunity, our students will maintain concentration over extended periods of time on these activities, often with no other incentive than the joy of the activity itself. As Steve put it,

S: Whenever I get home, after homework and everything, I do the scooters until like 9:00 at night. ... The longest amount of time [spent on scooter] was during the summer ... about 15 hours for a full day. I woke up about 3, went to bed around 10.

Our students have productive and dormant cycles in their creative activities. Bella described,

B: Some days there will be ... like, one week that I'll be, like, really into drawing, and it will be I draw a lot and stuff and sketch a lot. For a few weeks I won't really draw much or anything, and then I'll get back into it. It's kind of like random spikes whenever I end up drawing.

These cycles appear random, and therefore seem outside of our students' control. Finn said, "I can't force myself to have certain thoughts or feelings. I go with the flow and get ideas and creativity down as they come."

Our students also tend to cycle from one creative domain to another. This cycle may be based on activities that have a "season" (like band and soccer). Abby stated that she creates less origami, drawing, and writing during band season. When the band season ends, she cycles back to her other creative outlets, though she never ceases to engage in them completely. Though down time is understood to be an important part of creative work (Amabile et al., 2005; Newport, 2016), our students may see this tendency to pick up and then set down creative interests as a weakness of character rather than a necessary part of their creative process.

The process of being creative has been studied and modeled extensively, from the Helmholtz 1896 model (in Martindale, 1999) of preparation, incubation, illumination/inspiration, and finally verification/elaboration, to the more recent creative problem-solving model, with its four stages of clarification, ideation, development, and

implementation (Puccio et al., 2011). These and other studies show the cyclical nature of creative activity, including the importance of an incubation period in which information, skills, and questions are processed and ordered unconsciously through processes such as sleep and daydreaming (Martindale, 1999; Smallwood & Schooler, 2015), as well as simple time away from the problem (Amabile et al., 2005; Newport, 2016). This uncontrolled aspect of creativity is paired with a strong need to control one's own time and creative activities (Csikzentmihalyi, 2013, p. 144). Our students have an intuitive understanding of these aspects of creativity, but they may not be in line with what they (or important others in their life) see as having a good work ethic.

Our students not only need novelty and down time to maintain their creativity, they need uninterrupted time. Time constraints are a main cause for cessation of creative activities for our students. Bella said, "Sometimes something else will start happening, and I just won't have any time for drawing." Otto said, "I used to write poetry a lot but that's like, I really don't have time for that. I did used to write things a lot. I kind of start off on a tangent and just write." Creativity takes uninterrupted time (Csikzentmihalyi, 2013; Newport, 2016). Our students find interruptions in creative activities can be a major impediment to creative productivity. Finn said,

F: Everyone around me has a super-regimented way of doing things, like, when they are asked to do something they can just do it, and when I'm asked to do something ... OK, I'm going to need to, like, rewire my brain for the day in order to be able to do this. I can't just change. ... It's as if my brain has tendrils coming out of it, and they're doing a thing and I can't just rip them out and like, start doing another thing.

Our students place a high priority on their creative activities and skills. They feel they are good at these things and derive a great deal of satisfaction from them. However, the value they place on these activities is not always supported by the way others (and they) expect them to allocate their time.

Our students may like creative classes like creative writing and band partially because these classes allocate time for creative endeavors within the school space, where they otherwise don't always feel that their creativity is welcome. They may wish they could take even more classes in music (or another creative subject) than they currently take. Overall, they may prefer creative, active classes over academic ones. However, our students sometimes dislike classes in their creative strength areas because they want complete freedom to make the work that they want to make. Though a class in drawing, painting, creative writing, or computer game design would give them time in which to work on their creativity with the support of the school and parents, they may resent the structure of assignments and outside expectations, which sometimes hamper their creativity rather than fostering it. School is also public, and our students may not feel comfortable creating in a space where others can see and potentially judge their creation.

Creativity and space. Some spaces are welcoming to creativity. Others are not. Our students feel at home in spaces where their creativity is welcome. These places in school, which have become a home for our students, are places where they can let their guard down. Our students have taken ownership of some spaces at school (several mentioned the performing arts hallway). They find this ownership in places in which they

spend a lot of time, find people with whom they can be sure they have something in common, and places where they don't feel they will be seen as weird.

Our students see their own room at home as a place for creativity. Beyond the barrier of their bedroom door, they can be messy, choose how to use their own time, and have a buffer between themselves and external pressures. This space and others are familiar, safe, welcoming, and often private—at the very least they are places where fear of failure is lessened, and sense of control is high.

Different places have different associations and different expectations our students take on and shed as they move from one space to another. Bella explained,

B: I feel like at home I don't want to focus on school. I don't want to have to do anything with school at home. When I'm at school it's like just where I am, and I want to focus on that. Then if I'm somewhere else, I only want to be focusing on something that goes on elsewhere. ... I feel like ... home is just your own time.

Our students may feel that their home, once they reach it, is a place where school expectations should not intrude on creative endeavors.

Just as some spaces are friendly toward creativity, some are hostile. Our students find that spaces which feel hostile to creativity are places of low competence, high exposure to the judgement of others (especially strangers), and places where our students feel that they have little choice in what they may do while there. Our students may have difficulties in spaces where they must present or perform work in front of others. High levels of competition can also make a place feel hostile (as we saw with Finn's withdrawal from orchestra).

One place that is friendly toward creativity and to which our students may retreat if in a hostile setting is the imaginary space our students create in their mind. Our students may withdraw to this space in daydreams when bored or elaborate on a favorite imaginary world when avoiding a disliked task. Building these imaginary spaces (and sometimes characters) is enjoyable in itself and may be part of one or more creative activities our students practice for its own sake, whether that is writing, drawing, or game design.

Corporeal creativity. Our students are more aware of their senses—sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste—than those around them (Martindale, 1999), but may be unaware of this difference between themselves and others. Our parents have seen incidents of difficulty with clothing tags, wearing shoes, and other sensual sensitivities, including ones focused on sound, smell, and taste. This ability to notice small things that others may miss can feed creativity, sparking ideas and providing fodder for synthesis (Martindale, 1999; Davis, 2003).

This sensitivity makes them susceptible to distraction. If a room is too hot, it can be hard to work. An uncomfortably hard chair may hijack attention away from a lesson. A buzzing fluorescent light may be concentration shattering. Otto said,

O: [Creativity] can be good or it can be bad. ...I can get sidetracked on things. And other times, it can really push me to want to do things. The more creative-oriented classes I really excel in. ...The ones that aren't, I can get through, and they are the ones that kind of put a noose on that and hang it out to dry. I do not care for [those classes].

In addition to being a distraction, this sensitivity, particularly when coupled with high skills or knowledge in a curricular area, can help our students notice ways to

improve their work, without necessarily relying on an adult for guidance. Our students may even have found that they are better at finding flaws in their own work than teachers or parents. Our students are frustrated with this lack of external challenge, feeling bored, and feel that, somehow, school is not as useful as it should be. They may begin to rely on their own judgment over the judgement of others. Otto explained, “I get that [the teacher is] in charge of the room. It’s not that I’m a behavioral distraction. But I want to get work done the way that I get it done best, and she doesn’t allow me to do so.”

Our students may hold unreasonably high self-imposed standards for their work, causing them to feel a disconnect between grades and quality of work. Finn lamented, “I kind of wish they expected me to be perfect. I feel like [teachers’] expectations of me are so low and I sort of want people to have high expectations of me.” Taking on this internal judge can cause our students to begin to curtail their own creativity, as nothing they do is ever good enough. Creative endeavors, which were once areas of comfort and relaxation, may become areas of anxiety and disappointment.

When our students are not experiencing negative perfectionism about their creative endeavors, engaging in creative activities is relaxing. Bella explained,

B: There’s something about playing an instrument to me that’s just kind of relaxing in a way. ... It’s really familiar to me now and so it kind of makes it just, I don’t know, I guess, yeah, relaxing.”

Familiarity with the activity, its use of body and mind together, integrated in a challenge that stretches but also confirms their confidence, makes creative endeavors self-rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Abby said, “I find [music and art activities] pretty

relaxing, and both of them have thought put into, but both of them can also be done just because you're doing it, you know?"

I observed most of the students engaged in their chosen creative endeavors (for the others I saw finished products), and I watched them as they talked to me about the creative things they liked to do. While discussing science and creativity, Otto began to talk about space. He leaned forward in his chair, gestured with his hands, and his words started to come faster. He smiled as he spoke, and his eyes lit up.

O: I'm absolutely fascinated with space. ... I have a lot of kids ask me why I'm interested in space, and I say because that's where we need to go. ... I believe that space, it's like the solution. I feel like it can fix the economy. It gives us a single purpose for mankind.

Though it looked different on each student, what I saw on their faces was joy. Their creativity became a wellspring of joy that made them feel, look, and act more alive.

The relationality of creativity. Our students' experience of their own creativity is mitigated by their perception of our parents' opinion of their creativity and creations. Our students feel our parents have mixed ideas about student creativity. They may feel that our parents see career opportunities or skills that could be applied to future endeavors embedded in the creative activities. Bella said,

B: They said that it's probably a good thing that I like playing an instrument and stuff and that it's good for me to learn about hard work and all that stuff that band is teaching me pretty much and commitment-type things.

They may have invited their parents to witness their work, even if it was only partially complete. Bella told me, "If it's [writing] something that I'm working on for more than a week then I'll usually show them it." Our students' parents may not agree with each other

in their opinions of their creativity. For instance, Finn's mother is extremely supportive of a possible future career in art and continued enrollment in orchestra, while her father, who no longer lived with them, is (Finn believes) pretty much unaware of her creative accomplishments. No matter how supportive our parents are, our students feel some degree of tension with their parents about time and/or resource allocation for creative endeavors. Otto mentioned that "My parents get mad at me for wasting printer ink because they don't let me use the computer to use pictures as a visual reference [for drawing]." Our parents sometimes limit student time on loved creative activities in an attempt to get them to finish assigned work.

Interaction with teachers also influences our students' experience of their own creativity (Hong et al., 2009). Our students believe that their teachers (with a few exceptions) know about their creative activities only if these activities tie in with class content and delivery. A drawing teacher would definitely know if the student were particularly good at drawing, but a history teacher might find this out because the student would do the illustration for a group poster, and otherwise would not know. Our students see this as natural and fair, even if they wish for more opportunities to use their creativity in various classes.

Our students make a clear distinction between core classes and electives. Our students tend to favor the elective classes that they often see as fun, more active in terms of engagement with instruction, and, often, having a creative component. Otto explained about school:

O: I really like the creative aspects about it, like with the project where we get to choose something, and we get to elaborate on it. ... But when it's really confining, and it only gives you one path to follow, and you have to take that path, or you'll lose points, [a] discipline type thing, then it gets kind of tedious for me.

Our students describe having more difficulty in “boring” classes that tend toward lecture and note-taking.

Peer relationships have an impact on our students' creative experiences as well. Our students think of themselves as introverts, and experience at least some level of social anxiety, especially when asked to present in front of a class with whom they feel little connection. Yet, they may also greatly enjoy performing some creative activities in front of others, activities including playing an instrument, playing soccer, and twirling. They are confident and excited about these performances, and the performances bring a feeling of joy and accomplishment.

Creative activities can provide an opportunity for our students to find connections with peers. Bella said, “I like that [band] gives me opportunities to meet people who have common interests as me.” These structured activities, which by their nature are collaborative, give our students an excuse to meet other people, but lower the emphasis on the social interaction. They become about the performance, not about how to behave around others. This lets friendships form gradually through common experience and lowers social anxiety for our students.

On the other hand, sharing what they have created can make our students feel exposed. Finn said,

F: I have a blog that I post [writing and art] on, but a lot of friends and family are blocked from it, so I don't really like to share my artwork with people that I know because it stresses me out.

Our students feel they are different from many of their peers, socially isolated, or even ostracized. Otto said, "They will kind of downplay kids who aren't like them, and they will, they like to ... they will taunt ... they kind of hold themselves a notch above everybody else around them." Sharing something as precious as their creativity with these other students, then, is too great a risk.

Discussion

I began this study with the supposition that creative students might not fit well into the current public education system, and that this mismatch could contribute to underachievement. This is not a new idea. Kim (2008) suggests that creative student's needs aren't being met in the classroom, that this makes them underachieve, and that then, sometimes,

Highly creative children suppress their creativity and become overly conforming and obedient. They are likely to grow up with a lack of confidence in their own thinking and be overly dependent upon others in making decisions (p. 238).

In other words, they learn helplessness, a condition that is a main contributing factor to underachievement (Dweck, 2000; De Castella et al., 2013).

To be successful, creative individuals need more than their inherent and cultivated traits and skills. They need the right environments and conditions (Feldman, 1999).

Environments hostile to creativity are hostile to creative people, as creative people use creative activities to understand themselves, gain a feeling of personal order and control, and regulate their emotions (Collins & Amabile, 1999). Kim (2008) states, "Once

creative students were in an environment that met their needs, they performed much better” (p. 238). So, what are these needs, and do the environments and conditions of the study site support or undermine these needs?

Our students have described creativity-friendly spaces as places where creativity is welcomed and valued, that are emotionally safe (so people there understand, accept, and don't judge them), and places where they have high autonomy. In these places, our students don't feel they are impinging on anyone else's needs, they experience a high level of competency, and may also have privacy and feel ownership of the place.

Table 3 compiles factors that various researchers have identified as creativity-friendly or necessary for fostering creativity. The literature is in line with student experiences from this study.

Table 3

Context Factors Supportive of Creativity

Type of Factor	Factor
Attitude of authority	Learning goal orientation (Hong et al. 2009)
	Motivated toward own creative activities (Hong et al. 2009)
	Supports/encourages and assists creativity (Markus and Oldham, 2006; Siegel & Kaemmerer, 1978)
	Tolerates differences (Hong et al., 2009; Siegel & Kaemmerer, 1978)
	Provides emotional support (Eddles-Hirsche et al., 2010; Hong et al., 2009)
	Expectation of creativity (Markus and Oldham, 2006)
Resources & Opportunities	Alignment of goals between organization and individual (Siegel & Kaemmerer, 1978)
	Appropriate level of challenge (Eddles-Hirsche et al., 2010)
	Exposure to subjects, ideas, and ways of thinking (Purcell & Eckert, 2006; Sternberg, 2012)
	Personal resources such as intellect, knowledge, self-efficacy, risk taking, unique thinking styles, and motivation (Sternberg, 2012)
	A culture which values creativity (Markus and Oldham, 2006)
	A positive mood (Amabile et al. 2005)
	Time (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013)
	Materials (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013)
	Motivational work (Hong et al., 2009z0)
	Self-pacing (Eddles-Hirsche et al., 2010)
Choice (Eddles-Hirsche et al., 2010)	

Conditions that undermine creativity include: evaluation, surveillance, contracted-for rewards (in other words, “if you do this, you will get this” conditions), task constraint, and competition (Collins & Amabile, 1999). Our students feel a place is hostile to

creativity when they feel incompetent, exposed to judgement, low autonomy, and possibly competition (which combines possibilities of incompetence and the judgement of others).

With these needs and conditions in mind, is our school a creativity-friendly environment? Our teachers don't feel that it is. Despite their best efforts, time constraints and curriculum influence them to choose content delivery (high in task constraint and low challenge) rather than content exploration (low in task constraint and potentially high challenge), particularly in academic areas. While trying to provide activities that appeal to our students' aesthetic sensitivities, these activities may still feel constrained to our students, offering little true autonomy.

Other aspects of school and content delivery also make creativity difficult. Students are in a position where they are regularly evaluated and watched, both by fellow students and by teachers. The ubiquity of this evaluation is exacerbated by Infinite Campus (IC), the online grading system and its accompanying interface Campus Portal. With teachers required to enter grades at least once a week, and parents checking these grades constantly, our students are always aware of this judgement. Grades are a contracted reward, and so feel coercive (Collins & Amabile, 1999). Task constraints help students understand expectations for learning and grades, but they limit autonomy and creativity. Some teachers use competition to motivate students, but our students often find this threatening. With the school overcrowded, our students have little to no chance of finding privacy, though the people they feel most comfortable with often congregate in one place, and this place feels more welcoming and safe.

Students see little evidence in academic classrooms that their creativity is valued, except in the few cases where their creative strengths are revealed, and it doesn't occur to our students that anything is wrong with this because this is the way that school has always been. I find this lack of expectation for a better fit and value placed on creativity particularly telling. If it doesn't occur to the students that their creativity should be valued in these settings, it implies that it is not regularly valued, or that this value is not communicated successfully. To our students, academic classes aren't the place for creativity. Elective classes may be friendlier to creativity, depending on the level of task restraint and student autonomy, as well as the intrinsic motivation and interest our students have about the elective content. But our students may have had experience with too much restraint and judgement in elective classes as well.

Is our students' home a creative-friendly environment? Parts are, and parts are not. Our students' room is clearly so, a place free of judgement and high in autonomy. The rest of the house may or may not be, and this may change depending on who is there. Our parents' attempts to shape student behavior to comply with achievement goals can make communal space in the home feel hostile to creativity. Parents may feel joy, wonder, and pride for our students' creative endeavors, but this may or may not come across to our students. Our students' perception of parental (and, to some extent, teacher) support for creative activities falls along a continuum.

Table 4

Perceived Valuation of Creative Activities

Low value		High value		
Hostile	Indifferent	Means to an end	Useful	Valuable
Creativity is a problem. Activities are a hinderance to accomplishing important things.	Creativity is not considered. Creativity is not valued or seen, or it is fine if it doesn't get in the way of important goals.	Creativity is a support for something else. Creative activities teach skills that may be useful in other contexts but are not valued for themselves.	Creative activities are fun and teach useful skills that may lead to career opportunities.	Creative activities are valuable in themselves. They bring joy to our students and anyone who views them.

Our parents may value creativity and creative activities differently depending on the circumstance and context. Our students may or may not have an accurate view of how various adults (parents and teachers) value creativity in general and their creative activities in particular. Nevertheless, these perceptions shape student behavior and experience, possibly contributing to underachievement. I will explore this further in the next three chapters.

CHAPTER SIX: THE LENS OF MOTIVATION

Motivation is interactional. “Social contexts catalyze both within- and between-person differences in motivation and personal growth, resulting in people being more self-motivated, energized, and integrated in some situations, domains, and cultures than in others” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Students interact with themselves, with a task, activity, or assignment, and with those whose emotions, thoughts, and expectations are tied up in the students’ motivation. Motivation is closely tied to issues of power, but I will attempt to tease out some of the differences between motivation and power and address them separately.

The word motivate comes from the Latin *mot-* or *movere*, meaning “to move” (Oxford University, 1971, p. 1859). To motivate students is to move them from one place (ignorance, for instance) to another (knowledge). In such a case, when the motivator is someone other than the student, motivation is a subset and consequence of exercised power (Raven, 1992). In the language used by study participants, motivation is more commonly used to refer to one’s ability to get *oneself* moving. Participants did not use the word power very often, but the concept of someone with greater authority affecting the behavior of another with lesser agency was pervasive, particularly when an attempted exercise of power failed.

This brings me to a question raised in many forms by most study participants: Can one person truly motivate another? One can attempt to use power to influence another,

but it is up to the target of that influence to make judgements about how to value the benefits and detriments the influencer offers/threatens, overtly or covertly (Raven, 1992). Through this judgement the target is moved, not through the judgement of the influencer. If the value judgements of influencer and target are not aligned, particularly if the influencer is unaware of this misalignment, attempts to motivate the target will have unpredicted effects. With this in mind, while discussing motivation, I will focus on the motivational state of the student, rather than the influential attempts of the parent and teacher, though a great degree of crossover occurs between the two. I will focus on exercised power in Chapter 8.

In this chapter, I will explore the experience of student motivation from the point of view of the teacher, the parent, and the student, through the filters of time, space, body, and relationality. At the end of the chapter, I will link these experiences with literature on motivation and student achievement.

Our Teachers and Student Motivation

Student motivation is important to our teachers. They enjoy the collaborative aspects of learning, and when a student is motivated the back and forth between student and teacher is alive, vibrant, and rewarding for both. When a student is unmotivated, our teachers feel like they are engaged in a constant struggle. Teacher perception of student motivation shapes how our teachers allocate class time, arrange classroom space, how they feel physically, and how they interact with our students.

Motivation and time.

HL: I did model an assignment off of something where, and this goes against grading for learning, so I'm a hypocrite, but because these kids are very motivated, I said you know what? With this creative writing piece, if you play my game if you will, you're going to get 50 out of 50, and here's the game. You get me a draft, I'm going to give you feedback. You give me another one, and we will do that indefinitely until you reach some level that I think is proficient, or I've seen some improvement, or whatever. I do have an end date. We can't let this drag on forever, and if you hand it in on that last day, then I'm just going to grade it by the six-trait rubric or something. I did ask kids in a survey whether they liked it or not, and it seemed like most of them did, and they maybe just liked the 50 out of 50, but I did hear one girl, one girl specifically asked me if we could do it again, because she thought it took away the pressure of the grade and just let her focus on her writing, and I would say, my little survey, overall, that's what the kids said. It was like you know what? It was kind of nice to be not worrying about the A, and just work on this piece of writing.

Our teachers see time as a major factor in student motivation. They feel that they are required to teach a lot of material in a short time to a lot of students, and that this negatively effects student motivation. They see a difference between assignment completion and learning, and they are not sure that most of their students see this difference, though some do. They know that grades are a fairly weak motivator. When there is too much material to cover for true learning, Cody Slade said,

CS: A very complex idea ... takes a long time to understand it, so they need to, in order to really understand it, they have a lot of groundwork that they have to do to get to the point where they can communicate that.

Our teachers must choose between covering required information, and structuring lessons for curiosity, discovery, and learning.

Not only does this combination of high quantity of material and constrained time affect the ability to allow student choice, exploration, mistake making, and other types of

exploratory learning, but also it can ensure that some students will be left behind. Nadia said,

NH: I like to go back and make sure that they all get it and go back, and if most of them have got it I will move on, but some classes just keep moving, and they feel lost and discouraged, and I don't think that would be very fun.

She feels this built-in overscheduling reduces student enjoyment of school, and so lowers their motivation. Our teachers may (or may not) decide to depart from departmental norms and attempt to alleviate this overload by targeting assignments. Samantha Johnson said,

SJ: My homework is never more than five questions a week, and so I am not a drill and kill teacher. I don't assign the 1 through 30 odds, or something silly like that. That's not how I operate. I pick and choose very specifically the questions I want them to do, and it's either (1) get a preview of what we're about to do, and so it gives them the skills they need for that, or (2) it is remediating something that I've seen is a struggle for us. Additionally, it is assigned at the beginning of the week, due at the end, so it really allows for that flexibility for students.

But our teachers may instead simply feel conflicted about the work load—particularly homework—and may even have come to the point where they don't assign homework anymore, except perhaps when a student misses class or doesn't complete classwork in the time allotted.

Our teachers know that many things compete for student time and attention and believe that the allocation of this time can make a difference in student achievement (as in the last chapter when Roger Starbucks spoke about rehearsal time). They may feel that extra pressure from advanced classes, differing types of diplomas, and various leadership and other clubs which supposedly look good on a college application can distract students from concentrating on learning rather than on grades. They feel that this pressure is

different than when they were in school and is causing students to pay attention to external pressures to look successful, rather than finding internal motivation for learning.

Motivation and space. Our teachers do what they can to make the school space welcoming, but some aspects of space and motivation are beyond their control.

Prison-style look of the school. Though our school has an open campus with three separate buildings as well as some modulars and outdoor learning spaces (most of which are used for sports of some type), the classrooms feel closed in. Brick is prominent in most classrooms, with small windows near the ceiling (if there are windows at all). The courtyard between the buildings is solid concrete, with a few picnic tables near the cafeteria building. Study participants occasionally referred to this area as the “prison yard.” The single entry to the student parking lot causes traffic jams before school, at lunch, and after school. The school is over capacity as well, with severe crowding in the halls and some classes.

I completed data collection at the end of the 2016-2017 school year. A bond had just passed in the school district to build a second high school and conduct renovations at the study site. While this construction (which includes the demolition, relocation, and reconstruction of one of the three main buildings) is going on, traffic flow will be further restricted.

Study participants consistently expressed that the prisonlike space and crowding cause anxiety for teachers and students. Our teachers may travel from room to room to teach their classes, and this is becoming more frequent as student population increases without a current increase in space. The increased anxiety distracts and demotivates our

teachers and our students and takes attention away from taking care of student needs as our teachers deal with growing class sizes. At the beginning of each semester, our teachers may need to email the rest of the staff, looking for extra chairs and desks to accommodate the crowding.

The lack of aesthetic appeal, as well as the stress of overcrowding, has made the school space an unpleasant place to be. This distracts teachers and students and lowers their motivation to be at school.

School space vs real world space. Our teachers have seen students motivated by the connection between school content and skills that they can use in the “real world,” in other words, in their future lives after they no longer attend high school. Inherent in this perception is the difference between school and the world outside of it, as well as our teachers’ desire and feeling of obligation to connect the two. Nadia said, “[Science notebooks are] how a scientist would do their work. They would have a field notebook and they would record what they are doing and draw the pictures and so forth.”

Our teachers are also aware that many times they fail in connecting school space and the real world. Cody said,

CS: When you leave high school, you are basically qualified to sit down and shut up for eight hours and do what you’re told. That’s what a high school diploma means, and for the most part, I think at minimum, that’s right. If you get a high school diploma, and this is what?

This disconnect between real world skills and the skills useful for success in the classroom, our teachers see as a source for student motivation problems.

Leveled classes' effect on motivation. Our teachers equate the classroom space with the classes that occur there. Therefore, even if an AP Human Geography class follows a regular Human Geography course in the same space, the space is affected by the class that inhabits it and will feel different depending on which of the two classes is happening. This means that having different levels of the same class can create differences in the space which affect motivation.

Core classes at the study site usually have two to three levels offered for the same class, with options to take additional or higher-level courses. For instance, three levels of Biology are offered to 10th graders to fulfill their Biology requirement for graduation. They can take regular Biology, Accommodations Biology (usually but not always taken by students on IEPs or 504s), or AP Biology.

Our teachers have seen the effect that offering multiple levels of classes has on student motivation. The leveling of classes has not only separated students by ability, it has also separated them by level of engagement: those who take AP Biology may be taking it because they want to. Those who take the other levels of biology take it because it is a requirement. Our teachers may feel that offering AP courses syphons off the most highly motivated students from the other classes, leaving the middle- and low-level classes low on energy, motivation, and peer examples of how to be successful. Hostility to the higher-level classes may extend to the point where they believe that AP should only be offered after a student has taken the regular track class, in other words, as an addition to the normal curriculum, rather than a substitution for it. This feeling may persist even if they are one of the teachers “lucky” enough to teach the advanced class.

Conversely, they may love what leveling allows them to do with instruction. For instance, the math department has grown much more flexible over the years. Grouping students by ability instead of age allows students more time to acquire skills if needed, or a chance to work to the limits of their abilities. Those of our teachers who teach an accommodations level class appreciate the chance to structure the class to these student's specific needs, take extra time on subjects, and offer more extensive differentiation, made possible partially by the presence of a paraprofessional adult to help with behavior and focus issues, as well as to give more immediate assistance. They also wish that some of the practices that they use with the accommodations classes (test correction, for instance) were available to use at all levels, though generally department policy doesn't allow this.

Those of our teachers who teach a high-level and/or AP class observe higher levels of motivation among their students, but feel that, for some students, this is not a higher motivation to learn, but rather a hyperawareness of grades. They have seen some of these students decide to cheat to achieve (more so than at lower levels), and some of our students have difficulty dealing with open-ended assignments, craving exact requirements so that they are assured of getting things "right." This leads to a situation in high-level classes where, as Cody said,

CS: Those students that get up to the really high levels of competing for certain scholarships and places in certain colleges, they really need to say okay, how do I learn this in order to get there, but that is a small fraction. Most of them, they just need to check boxes and get through the process, and I think that system discourages really thinking about what was I supposed to learn, instead of what do I need to do to get the grade.

Our teachers may feel that this motivation to check boxes instead of learning the material is the true underachievement, regardless of what the grades say.

Digital space. Within the classroom space is another vast world, the digital space. Teachers and the school district provide access to this space through school-provided internet access, Chromebooks, and computers. Students carry other portals to this space on the cell phones in their pockets. Digital space is so ubiquitous, our teachers struggle to monitor even a fraction of what happens in this space inside their classrooms.

Four digital spaces greatly impact the experience of underachievement for our participants. The school at which the study took place has a “student information system” called Infinite Campus (IC), which students and parents can access through Campus Portal, allowing them to see certain information. Teachers use this program to take attendance and as a virtual grade book (along with some other functions). They are required to update grades at least once a week. These grades are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for parents and students to view. The grades can be viewed as a cumulative number (your child has an 87% in English) or as individual assignments, including information on missing assignments. Teachers can even contact home in batches through this program, for instance, sending an email to all students who are missing an assignment, or to their parents.

The second digital space for students, teachers, and parents to interact is a learning management system called Canvas. Canvas is slowly replacing Google Classroom as a digital space to present and receive work to and from students and was a fairly new addition to the school at the time of the study. Many teachers at the time had

only a webpage introducing themselves to their classes in this space. Others were already utilizing the program fully, posting assignments, due dates, places to submit finished work digitally, digital class discussions, video tutorials, slide lectures, and other class resources and requirements in this interactive space. Parents can request to be added to a virtual class as an observer, thus giving them access to any lessons and due dates posted there, but many are not aware of this feature.

The third digital space is called PLATO and is an online credit recovery option for students. If they fail a class, they can pay a fee to take a credit-equivalent class on PLATO and count this class credit toward graduation requirements. Many students are able to complete a PLATO class in less time than a regular class. Opinions about whether these classes are easier, comparable to, or harder than their face-to-face equivalents vary with student and class.

Finally, the world of the internet in general is accessible through smartphones and computers. Our teachers feel that they are in direct competition with student cell phones, a competition they are losing. Roger said, "I think the kids' mentality, I think the electronic age has deteriorated a little bit some of our work, ethical type of behavior, and made some things easier that should be easy, but also made us a little lazy." Though they may see some benefit to digital access in the classroom, our teachers hate the effect that digital space has had on student concentration and attention span. Nadia vented,

NH: The cell phone issue is terrible. ... They are distracted, every, every few seconds. They can't stay on task because they are so distracted by whatever is happening on their phones. It's like an addiction. They are using them inappropriately. Most of them use them to cheat, take pictures of assignments, and send them to each other. It disrupts the class quite a bit, because they can't

regulate themselves to stay off it during instruction time. I feel like when they are working in groups, the cell phone comes out and now they're not engaged with their group any more. I feel like they don't think it is rude to be on their phones when somebody is talking to them. It is a huge problem.

Our teachers see cell phones as a factor contributing to underachievement, but do not feel that they can compete. Or, they feel that if a student chooses to pay attention to a cell phone instead of classwork, the student simply won't do as well in the class, and this consequence will either motivate the student to be more responsible, or it won't.

Motivation and body. Our teachers experience student motivation and the body by observing student body language. They associate certain body language with high levels of motivation. Students talk quickly and enthusiastically about the subject matter, gesturing as they speak to each other. They ignore distractions and focus on the work at hand, all senses locked on the work, intensity on their faces. Or, they look relaxed, happy, and engaged.

Our teachers observe lack of motivation in student body language as well. Nadia said,

NH: They're trying to be cool or whatever. They don't want to laugh at a joke, because it might not be cool to laugh at the joke, or it might not be cool to just dive in and enjoy learning, because that's different.

They see strategies our students may have developed to avoid work, "for avoiding performing in class more," Cody said, "like not making eye contact, saying 'I don't know,' or even acting like they don't know sometimes."

This lack of motivation may look like lack of organization to our teachers, but when a student doesn't take the time to self-advocate and ask for help with such difficulties, our teachers may feel little motivation to help the student. Roger said,

RS: That is the person who needs to have their stuff together, and if they don't have their stuff together, they need to get help with getting their stuff together, and they have to care enough to get their stuff together and go get the help.

Motivation and relationships. Our teachers believe that strong relationships with their students are inherently motivating. These relationships come in many forms.

Building trust by meeting needs. Faith Billings described teaching as, "charging up students to get excited about learning. And it's like if I can come up with just the right mix of things to make them excited about what we're doing, then I know that they'll get it."

Our teachers feel deeply that it is their duty to respond to the needs of their students, and so build relationships that help students learn. Though these relationships are not an overt component of the curriculum, they know that without them, many students will disengage. Our teachers feel that having strong relationships with students can be a strong motivating factor.

To understand student needs, our teachers watch their students intently and systematically, through mandated data analysis and through daily interactions with students. These observations lead to changes in content delivery. Nadia described an example of this.

NH: The lab I just designed here: I noticed that students have a hard time understanding the content if the model isn't accurate enough, if it is too abstract, so I will tweak that sometimes. I drew all the cells and the nucleus, which I hadn't

done before, and then I add a lot of color, because I think color adds to their understanding.

Our teachers pay special attention to those students who struggle, to understand what is going on, and to provide appropriate individualized support. Cody said,

CS: I think first and foremost the thing that has to happen with underachieving students is there has to be a personal connection to the teacher for them to break out of that habit. I also think that sometimes we have to be careful: shy students aren't necessarily underachieving students, but it can look that way.

Our teachers know that some students are harder to reach, and that this will take more effort on their part. Samantha stated,

SJ: I think you have to get more buy in from those students, until you're going to get anything out of them. I also think that underachieving students are not usually underachieving because they lack the ability, but because they lack the belief in themselves, and I think you really have to take opportunities to build those students. You have to be very deliberate, and when you maybe ask them to answer a question in front of the class, you need to make sure that it is their strength, so you can build up their confidence, so ... they're more willing to take risks, and so I honestly feel that it is not their ability, it's their belief in themselves that make them underachieving.

In other words, teachers must help students feel competent and supported in that competence (Ryan & Daci, 2000; Dweck, 2000).

This work of building relationships with students can pay off, as over time our teachers and students lay a grounding of trust between them. Our teachers clearly communicate classroom norms, and they are careful to create situations in which our students can take risks. Cody said,

CS: Sometimes you can see them actually, if you are able to make a connection with them, you can see them feel more comfortable, completing the work, or asking questions. Asking questions, I think, is a big sign of interest, obviously, so not asking questions is a strategy to avoid that. I think that is a simple way of

them saying okay, I'm all right with this. It can take a while. It can take more than a semester sometimes, if you are lucky enough to have them that long.

This trust is a mutually built edifice, our students doing their part by slowly opening up, and by fulfilling their obligations to work, and to try to learn. Roger said, "I'm spending the time to try to do it. That's one of the things. Spending the time, and them seeing that okay, he does care about me. I do matter." Our teachers believe that creating this mutual trust helps to grow student motivation.

Breakdown of trust. When this trust breaks down, it can feel like a betrayal. Our teachers feel betrayed by the student; our teachers feel like the student is betraying him or herself, in that negative consequences for noncompliance, incomplete work, and cheating usually end up falling on the student—a self-betrayal; our teachers lose trust in their own judgement of an individual student and judgement of that student's level of motivation.

Our teachers experience this breakdown in trust most forcefully when a student cheats. Samantha finds this to be a particular problem for student perfectionists.

SJ: I think they are very dependent, and they don't want to take a risk, and then I think sometimes they want to take shortcuts to get there. I think those are our kiddos that we see take that cheating route a little more, unfortunately.

Cell phones provide a new and common way for cheating to occur. Our teachers feel that students have difficulty seeing the difference between doing work themselves and copying correct answers from a classmate, that such cheating on homework has become a cultural norm. Nadia said,

NH: I see a lot of students with the mentality, "I'm just going to get the points. I'm going to get the points however I can." Cheating, lots of cheating. ... Taking pictures of student's finished work and just copying it, or finding the completed assignment online, just looking off another student's paper, and they are all

concerned, well, not all of them, but those kids are concerned about their points, not learning. ... I used to give homework every single night, every day, and I've backed off from that, mainly because most of them just cheated on it.

This betrayal saps our teachers' motivation to put themselves into lessons and make them enjoyable and personalized. Why try to build relationships when the relationships will only be betrayed? Our teachers persist, anyway, but it all makes them feel tired.

Relationships with peers. Our teachers see that relationships with peers affect student motivation. They may use various homogeneous and heterogeneous groupings to facilitate peer-to-peer learning and teaching, feeling that students are more motivated to learn from their peers than they are from an adult teacher. They find that the mutual dependence of a group may increase motivation. Roger explained,

RS: You have 50 other people in the room with you, or 100 people in the room with you, depending on what you're doing, and it cannot be about you, at that point, so it's about the group, and you are part of the group, and you've got to do your part, but if you have 15 people who aren't doing their part, that's a breakdown in the entire group, and so they learn that worth of being part of a group.

Peer relationships can also hurt student motivation. As mentioned above, our teachers may feel that some students tamp down their own motivation to learn to appear "cool." Our teachers may feel that allowing students to take classes at different levels of difficulty has had an adverse effect on peer-to-peer motivation. Cody said,

CS: I think the level of participation and, there are students that can kind of bring a class along more based on their natural interest in a topic, and I think that has diminished [since AP classes have been offered]. I think it is fair to let kids who want to challenge themselves more get to challenge themselves more, but I think this is hurting other students when we do this this way, so I think there is a difference.

Our teachers see peer relationships as having the potential to increase or decrease student motivation to do well in school. Systems can be implemented at the school and classroom level to have some influence on the direction of this motivation, but some of it resides in the larger culture, and is outside our teachers' influence.

Our Parents and Student Motivation

Our parents' experience student motivation as a problem. They often attribute underachievement to lack of motivation, and they struggle to understand why motivation is low and what they should do about it.

Motivation and time. Our parents notice how student motivation and time interact, in the choices students make for using time, in their own changing expectations of evolving student motivation as the child grows older, and in differences in perception of time between parents and students.

Changing responsibility for motivation over time. Our parents experience time and how it relates to student motivation in many ways. Our parents feel an obligation to motivate their children but are also aware that the means and responsibility for student motivation shifts over time. When our students are in elementary school, our parents spend time exploring different interests with the child, with visits to the museum, watching educational programming together, going to the park or the zoo, creating reading challenges, and otherwise finding activities and topics which raise questions and pique curiosity. Our parents model motivation by showing that learning is fun. Our parents are also in charge of helping our young students stay organized, keep track of

obligations, and of helping our students understand homework and schoolwork, perhaps even using tutors or at-home learning programs.

As our students get older, our parents expect that our students will take the love of learning and the skills modeled at a younger age and begin to shoulder responsibility for pursuing these on their own by doing well in school. But this expectation is confounded, particularly the first two to three years of high school. Our parents may see that our students are smart and expect that they will get high grades to reflect that intelligence, but, as Edward explained, “Well, those expectations were too high apparently, and then over time, quite honestly, we’ve dropped our expectations, but even with the lowering of expectations, those seem to be too high.”

Our parents may try various parenting programs or books, looking for new techniques to try and help our students. When these produce little result, our parents experience disappointment and fear: hopes that once flourished give way to feelings of panic, that our students are running out of time, time to learn how to be independently motivated to choose a successful path in life, time to make mistakes before the consequences are irredeemable, time to understand that their current decisions and actions are already narrowing their opportunities in life. Our parents are faced with a choice: to try to reduce their child’s freedoms and so narrow his or her choices toward a path to success, or to allow their child to experience the negative consequences of his or her choices. Our parents will often try a combination of these actions.

At the end of junior year or partway through senior year, our parents may see a change in our students. Our students begin to take more responsibility for checking

grades and making up missed work. They may have a job and begin to apply skills to better manage their time. Hazel told me,

H: This year it's been a pretty sudden change. She's also got a job, and I think that responsibility on top of everything else just helps her organize herself more. She's only got so much time to devote to different things.

Our students may need less help with homework, and less monitoring by our parents to complete work for school. The obligation to be the primary motivation for our students has passed from our parents to their child, at least for the participants in the study who had reached this grade. Literature on gifted dropouts tell us that not all students who are struggling are able to make this shift (Hansen & Toso, 2007).

Parent perception of student self-motivation and time. Our parents see the effect of time on student self-motivation, and the limits of student self-motivation in time. They see that as our students start the year with some new and interesting activities, and some activities with which they have had success, they feel high levels of hope and motivation. Then, difficulties start to set in. Bad habits lead to small stumbles that sap motivation, leading to larger failures. Eventually, our parents see our students develop difficulties initiating work—even sometimes on activities they once enjoyed—fearing failure. They watch our students procrastinate, only motivated to finish work right before looming deadlines, sometimes missing these deadlines, setting themselves up for failure. Like resonance on the Tacoma bridge, a small ripple begins a downward cycle, setting up an escalating rhythm of failure and disappointment and leading to collapse. Our parents look on, frantic and helpless, unsure how to stop the cycle. It seems like something in the student is missing.

G: In college she wouldn't make it. The thing that she doesn't have that I think if she had it I wouldn't be as concerned, is like this sense of urgency when you're up against the wall, it's like, "Oh shoot, I better do something now." If she had that, I know she'd be fine, but it's almost like, you know, it could be the day before something was due and she'd be dawdling around with no sense of time urgency to pick it up.

Our parents worry that the missing thing is motivation. Teri recounted a conversation with Otto,

T: I said, "You, the drive has to come from within you, not exterior pressures, because if you don't want it for yourself, then it ultimately won't be a success. And you may be fine for a while, but eventually if the desire isn't there, the other things are going to fade away and the reasons for doing it, it will go away."

When our students' actions negatively affect their achievement, our parents will often react by restricting and monitoring our students. I will discuss this in depth in Chapter 8.

Parent understanding through comparison. Our parents attempt to understand our students by remembering what school was like when they were there and comparing it to our students' current experience. Our parents see a change in culture, with a greater emphasis placed on students to prepare for and enter a four-year college. This expectation requires a different level of motivation from students. Melody said, "I don't hear high schools wanting kids to be high schoolers anymore." At the same time, our parents see more flexibility in teaching techniques than when they were in school, teachers more willing to accept late work, opportunities to make up classes online rather than endure the humiliation of taking a failed class over with younger students. Our parents may feel that school used to be stricter, with more immediate consequences, and that the new flexibility may be eroding skills that our students may need in future life. Hazel said,

“There’s too much trying to level the playing field. In school, that’s the only time they’ll ever see a level playing field. They’ll never see it in life ever.”

Our parents also try to remember their own high school mind to empathize with what our students are feeling. Our parents may not have been great students themselves, with little expectation of going to college, and a perception that school was a hoop to jump through, a chance to play a sport, or to hang out with friends. They remember that grades may not have been a strong motivation, and that they didn’t see a connection between school and future goals. Yet, they eventually made it to college somehow, perhaps after time away from school working. Our parents may want an easier road for our students, a more direct path than they took. They understand our students’ lack of motivation because they remember what it was like, but they want something different and better for their child.

Motivation and space. Our parents view space as a way of influencing student motivation through actions, such as monitoring work. They may also have a sense that a designated space will assist in creating a habit and ritual of work, and so try to use space to assist their child. Mischel’s (2014) research supports this idea and shows that creating such a space-dependent habit does lower the level of motivation necessary to begin a task. Yet even this experience of motivation and space is, ultimately, an attempt to exert influence. Therefore, I will discuss how parents use space to motivate students in the power section.

The only other experience parent participants discussed was the observations of how space affected their children’s comfort level and creativity in a space, as discussed in

Chapter 5. Our parents know that our students are more comfortable in a space that feels welcoming. Our parents may or may not feel that this comfort level is a help to motivation.

Motivation and body. Feeling and emotion are key elements of human experience. They are intimately woven into how we interact with the world, and are impossible to separate from experience (Damasio, 1999, p. 35). References to emotion in language are intertwined with the body: my heart is breaking, my stomach turns, I see red, my hands shake. Chemicals are released in the brain and body—endorphins, adrenaline, dopamine, and others—changing the physical state of the body (Damasio, 1999). Experience of emotion is experience in the body. The experience of the self is also an embodied experience, as an entity separate from other entities (Hirstein, 2012). Thus, our parents’ emotional experience of the other who is their child is an embodied experience.

Throughout their child’s underachievement, our parents expend a huge amount of energy trying to motivate our students, or to help them find their own motivation. This takes a toll. Katie’s comment, “I felt like I was doing more work than she was,” was a common phrase, expressed by most parent participants in one way or another. When I asked what creative underachievement felt like to her, Elizabeth replied, “Frustration, yelling, mom stresses out.” Our parents are exhausted, worried, fearful for their child’s future, and feel helpless to change their situation. The constant battles have worn them down, and they feel responsible for something that they, ultimately, cannot control. They know that the motivation must come from our students but are unable to stop trying to fix

things themselves. Our parents want to change this, and so attempt to influence our students' behavior. I will discuss this in depth in Chapter 8.

Motivation and relationships. The parent/child relationship can be a motivator for the child to achieve. Our students want to be “good,” to please their parents, and test but maintain the safety of that connection (Berk, 2012). I will explore how a relationship can be a lever for power when looking through the power lens in Chapter 8. Here, I will focus on how the relationship itself serves as a motivator, how this looks and feels.

The love between our parents and our students is apparent on both sides. One of the ways it shows from the parent point of view is in the activities that our parents and students share. Our parents and our students may watch documentaries together, read and talk about similar books, and go to museums. Our parents may also overtly support our students' interests, even if they don't participate in that specific activity. Megan said, “I know she wants to be an artist and a writer and have a career doing something creative, and I fully support that.” Our parents also express love by trying to help our students succeed, though our students may rebuff and resent these efforts.

Our parents use their relationship with our students to understand our students' motivation by looking for parallels between their own high school experiences and our students, and sometimes by talking to our students about these similarities. Our parents see similarities between themselves and our students: disorganization, dislike of or disengagement with school, and not working up to their potential. Gene remembers, “So I guess I scanned through [assigned reading], pulled a few sentences out, concocted a

paper, probably started it at like 8:00 at night, and finished it, turned it in and got a C-, so yeah, that works for me.” Megan remembered,

M: High school wasn’t always fun for me either. ... I just kind of did what I could to maintain, even though I could have done better. I didn’t really have any desire to, and I kind of see that in her too, so she’d rather be drawing, or being creative, and I would rather go out and play basketball or whatever. I was in high school doing the same thing, just kind of doing the bare minimum, or less sometimes.

Our parents use their own experience to try and guide our students, evoke some sense of empathy in them so that they will understand they are not alone, stupid, or stuck, but that techniques our parents have learned may help with these problems. Katie recalled telling Bella,

K: I’m an airhead. I cannot remember where the heck I put my keys; what is due today? Because I have to have a system. ... I tried to share that with Bella. I have had the same problems, ... and so I understand, but getting her to understand that I understand.

Our students will often rebuff this help and offered intimacy. Edward said,

E: He’ll do it for a while, and then I think, I don’t know. ... It’s a roller coaster in high school. We have these peaks and these valleys, and when we hit the valleys, he’ll just flat out tell you that he does not see the point in doing the work so he can get a degree, to work hard, to get to this point just so he can get more work so he can work harder. What is the point in that?

This is not just a rebuff of Edward’s offered help. It is a clear statement that Otto doesn’t agree with the priorities of the culture that sets the rules for how his life should run.

Our parents understand that school is not our students’ top priority. They felt the same (usually) in their own schooling. In an attempt to motivate our students—by establishing empathetic comradery, to diffuse tension, and to make the task seem doable instead of overwhelming—our parents acknowledge that much of the required work for

school may not help student learning but is important for reaching goals of achievement: good grades, graduation, college acceptance, scholarships, and future career paths. Gene said, “She could be valedictorian if she was focused. It’s just seeing no point in homework.” Our parents may not have been very compliant students and tend to be honest with our students. They will not tell our students that an assignment will help with their understanding if our parents don’t believe that it will. Instead, they acknowledge that it is not important for growth, but is necessary to comply with a system that has power over our students. In other words, the work our parents are asking our students to prioritize is acknowledged by both of them to be hoop-jumping, yet our parents hope that this will motivate our students to prioritize this work over activities they find intrinsically rewarding and valuable, because they both know it is necessary in order to accomplish future goals.

One set of parents in the study did not follow this pattern. John and Melody, George’s parents, instead told him that it was his job to do the assigned work, and to do it to the best of his ability. Part of his job was to find something in the work that would help him grow and learn, even if it wasn’t apparent at the beginning. Completion was not the goal, learning was. While George had great potential to underachieve, he ended up not doing so. This difference in attitude toward homework and other “hoop-jumping” activities associated with school was one major difference between underachievement and achievement.

Our Students and Their Motivation

Our students experience frustration and confusion with their own motivation, watching it ebb and flow, feeling that they can't control it, but that they should be able to. They feel battered by how time, space, corporeality, and relationships change their motivation without their volition.

Temporal motivation. Time arcs in high school, arcs of hours, days, seasons, semesters, and years, and motivation changes with these time arcs. The school day starts at 7:55 a.m. as the first bell rings, calling students to class, again at 7:59, telling them they have one minute until they are late, and finally at 8:00 a.m., when the first class starts. The class lasts for 88 minutes, the bell rings again—five minutes to travel—and then a second morning class. Announcements mumble from the classroom loud speaker at the end of period two, then lunch begins with another bell, and back to a third class just after noon. One more passing period, and the day's last 88-minute class ends with a final bell at 3:14. The school day is over, except for homework and after school activities. The next day has the same pattern, but the classes change, the alternating block schedule allowing for four classes one day, a different set of four classes the next, and then back to the first set of classes.

Our students' motivation changes throughout the day. Otto stated, "School is really just something that I have to do." In classes with high motivation—ones where they are learning material they find interesting in ways that keep them engaged—time goes by somewhat unnoticed. In classes with low motivation, time is broken, experienced in fragments. Our students are distracted easily and feel the constant drag of boredom.

Sometimes they attempt to fill this time. “Sometimes I’d draw during classes when I was supposed to be taking notes,” Otto admits. But sometimes they simply tune out. Time feels wasted. Time is a trial. “Over time,” Otto said, “it kind of got to, ‘Are we done yet?’”

When motivation is low, it can be difficult for them to begin work. They may have difficulty finding an idea they consider to be the right one, perhaps engaging in negative self-talk. Distractions are welcomed or are more difficult to ignore than when their whole attention is engaged in a rewarding task such as (depending on the student) reading, writing, playing music, watching video tutorials, or something else. Attention wanders to possible future incidents of mistakes and judgment, draining motivation, a whirlpool of doubt and self-recrimination, fear of risk taking, and fear of failure, along with a persistent voice that may say, “There is no point, you are not good enough to succeed anyway.”

Sometimes the consequences of their choices for allocating their time seem far removed. *That assignment isn’t due until next week. I can finish that in about two hours. I don’t really need to do that to understand it, and I don’t care about the grade.* They may choose to use their time in a more interesting activity and procrastinate things that they “should” be doing. Abby said, “Homework, I’ve always stayed relatively on top of it, relatively as in—this is going to sound really bad and totally like a high schooler, but like—‘If I want to do it, I’ll do it,’ sort of thing.” What interests her, Abby continued, is “the real-life application, and if I find the concept interesting, like transcendentalism I found super interesting because it’s not like something we practice all that much now.”

Procrastination may be a way to increase the motivational power of the deadline. “I found myself where I only have the introduction done on a six-page essay the night before it’s due, and I’m working until 1:00 in the morning to fix it,” said Otto. Parents may attempt to impose restrictions and more immediate consequences than the consequences inherent in a distant final GPA limiting future options for college and career. These attempts are partially successful at best.

Our students have a sense that they are good at estimating how far they can put off assignments and still get them done. This perception differs greatly from our parents’ perceptions. Our students point to assignments done in a rush that still received good grades. Our parents point out the repeated pattern of falling behind on work and long, wakeful nights at the end of the semester scrambling to get caught up, and sometimes failing to do so.

Our students complete the work they believe is important, but external pressures to complete work they see as unimportant have little effect, resulting in missed deadlines. Though our students seem (to adults) to have a flawed sense of time’s passage—losing time playing on a smartphone and procrastinating schoolwork while pursuing more valued activities—it may be that our students create two priority lists for the use of their time: the first list is the one they feel they are expected to have (an external, dictated list), the second is the one that reflects their true values. Our students pay lip service to the expected priorities, sometimes even convincing themselves that these priorities are truly their own, but the list connected to their own priorities often wins in the end. Creativity is time consuming. “Forgetting” about work, procrastinating, and simply deciding not to do

assignments allows more time to pursue creative endeavors. This “poor use of time” may be a way for our students to follow their own priorities without seeming to be outwardly defiant.

Otto has a different experience of the two priority lists. He believes that he should want to follow the dictated list, but this causes him great inner conflict, and he takes it out on himself with negative self-talk, anxiety, arrogance, performance pressure, and isolation. Finn also has some of these self-destructive tendencies, but is a year older and in counseling, which has helped with these issues over the course of the study year.

Motivation ebbs and flows with the cycle of the school year. The beginning of the year is a time of optimism. Our students believe that this year will be (or already is) different. It is a new start, with new resolve. They think that the act of deciding that things will be different will make them different. They assert that they know what they need to do to make that change, to do better at school, and are resolved to do so. They convince themselves that the dictated list of priorities—dictated by parents, school, culture, even peers—aligns with their personal values.

I asked Otto, “Do you feel like you have the tools that you need to be able to get your momentum going again?”

O: Oh, yeah. Most of the time, I have access to the tools. I think the biggest problem is me kind of wallowing in it.

I: By tools, I’m not talking so much like access to a computer or having the books that you need, but it’s more like having strategies that you can use?

O: Yeah, I do have the tools. I think it’s motivation is what my biggest problem is.

I: Do you know how to turn that motivation back on?

O: No, not really. That’s my biggest problem.

Our students view past difficulties with school as a failure of willpower—a character flaw that can be fixed with resolve, not with learned and practiced strategies, techniques, or tools. Though they have been given prepackaged organizational techniques (e.g., folders, color-coded calendars, planners), they have abandoned these because none seem to work for them. They seem like extra work that is not at all helpful. These attempts have failed so many times that they are skeptical that any such steps could work, so there is a tension between wanting to fix the problem and believing it is impossible to do so. Lacking concrete strategies to overcome missing skills, they quickly fall into old habits, unable to reach the outcomes they viewed so hopefully. Their hope begins to fail, and with it, their motivation. Otto explained, “Usually it was the work. As soon as we got to taking notes, doing an assignment, usually it [motivation] turned off.” Their negative self-talk increases, and they see themselves as weak. This hopelessness makes it harder and harder to keep trying. Their grades drop in the middle of the semester, then may rise to Ds and Cs by semester’s end, after a hard push, motivated by the proximity of the grade that counts toward a cumulative grade point average. Or, they may even give up the effort for the remainder of whatever classes are causing difficulty.

Schedules shift at the beginning of second semester, and the winter break may provide some relief from stress, a chance to recharge. It is also time to choose new classes for next year. Perhaps next year will be better! This idea may bring a surge of hope and renewed motivation. Or, it may be a time of fear and self-doubt, as they see their pattern of underachievement as something out of their control, but for which they are ultimately responsible. Guilt and hopelessness drain motivation again. The second

semester begins to mirror the drop in achievement that happened in September or October. By the end of the year, few things have changed. They have failed to do well in school again.

Literature on gifted underachievement (e.g., Rimm, 2003; Siegle, 2013) points to a pattern of early achievement in elementary school, followed by a dip in later years (middle school, high school, or early college). This underachievement is triggered by a student's first encounter with material or assignments that are a real challenge. They have had little experience with failure and lack the resiliency and specific strategies to alter their outcomes, since they didn't learn them when they were being taught explicitly. Instead they learned that those techniques, like studying and taking notes, were unnecessary to learn the material and complete assignments.

The student participants in this study didn't follow this pattern. The daily and yearly peaks and valleys in motivation and achievement of our students take place against a larger background of past life and looming future, but the past is not what the literature led me to expect. Instead, our students have always had an ambiguous relationship with school. They may have had a learning disability (diagnosed or not). They may also have had behavior problems. Otto described "looking at things and saying, hey, that's a bad idea. Let's do that," in elementary school. Their motivation may have been closely tied to specific teachers and/or subjects. Disengagement due to boredom or lack of belief in the relevance of material started young. Moving from one school district to another may have caused some difficulties as well, lowering motivation due to social isolation and unfamiliarity with expectations and systems. By the time they enter high school, our

students are already underachievers. All the above factors have been linked to dropping out (Hansen & Toso, 2007).

The beginning of freshman year is a time of both hope and fear: hope that high school will be more interesting, more welcoming, a better fit; fear that what they do now will have real world consequences. The motivation from these hopes and fears is not enough to overcome lack of organization and resiliency skills, disappointment in class content and delivery, and the appeal of the immediate over the importance of long term goals and consequences. Old patterns reemerge, and our students have difficulty with the heavy core class requirements, due to lack of interest, incompatibility of learning/teaching styles (most participants claimed there were too many lectures and busywork homework assignments), boredom, and/or perceived lack of relevance to current and future life. Underachievement is ongoing.

Our students hit a low point at the end of sophomore year or the middle of junior year. Things have not gotten better, and pressure increases, from teachers, parents, the school system, and the looming future. They begin to realize that their GPA is harder and harder to effect, and some options for future college and career are beginning to narrow. They feel more pressure than ever to turn around their performance; they also have greater motivation to ignore these pressures and live in the moment, where they can feel some relief from the stress.

By the end of junior year or sometimes senior year, things begin to get better (at least for the participants of this study who were at this age). Our students have emerged from their most difficult public school years with a stronger sense of who they are as

people, and a greater sense of agency, both of which help with motivation. They have more control over their schedules as many required classes are complete and their motivation increases as they can tailor classes to their interest. They are more motivated to work at required but disliked classes as time to retake classes is running out, and they want to graduate on time. They are beginning to see life after high school as a real thing, to set self-chosen goals, and to see how a diploma will help achieve those goals. Even the less personally relevant classes are becoming relevant.

Spatial motivation. Spatial motivation can be aesthetic. Our students walk into a new classroom, like the decorations, the comfy-looking couch against the side wall, the arrangement of desks into graceful curves around the room, and feel welcomed and safe. They are predisposed to feel safe, welcomed, and empowered. They immediately want to do well here.

Spatial motivation can be tied to feelings of competence and familiarity in a space. In school, a classroom belongs to a teacher and a subject. The students quickly come to associate that space with the teacher, the subject, and their experiences of both in that space. Our students find that walking into a space where they feel competent focuses attention, decreases anxiety, and predisposes them to feel motivated to do well. If the space is associated with a hated subject, or a subject the student would rather experience with greater autonomy than is offered in that space, the student may walk in already defeated. Abby explained, “If I find the subject super interesting or the way it’s taught like really cool or anything like that I find myself paying more attention than if it’s a class where it’s like monotone lectures the whole time.”

Space can shape motivation by how a student perceives the appropriateness of a space for a specific activity. Bella said, “I feel like for me it would be good to take a study hall class.” This is her acknowledgement that she works on schoolwork better at school than at home. It affects her motivation to work on schoolwork because it feels space-appropriate. She explained further,

A: Usually I don’t really like most classes...It’s really more, ‘OK, I’m going to get through this class to get to my next class that I like.’ It really depends on the class and what we’re learning that is how much I like school.

Like most participants, her motivation and enjoyment or dislike of school is class-specific, not a general like or dislike of school.

Corporeal motivation. The body feels things through the senses, and corporeal motivation is often about aesthetics for our students. They see or hear something and it sparks an idea: they will begin to draw or write. They see an object, appreciate its colors, textures, usefulness, and feel the appeal and draw of the object. They may see something that is aesthetically out of joint and feel the itch to make it click into aesthetic balance.

Bella explained,

B: Seeing something in real life and kind of wanting to change it in a way but not really being able to do anything, so I draw it instead...Sometimes if I find a sketch book or something I’ll be like ‘Oh, sketchbook! I may as well use it.’ ... There will be like commercials on YouTube and stuff and sometimes I’ve seen ones where it’s like somebody drawing something and I’m like, ‘Oh, I’m going to draw that too.’

The motivation is an invitation the object presents to our students, which they accept, engaging with the object (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015). Attention is caught and becomes action.

Corporeal motivation also derives from past positive experience with an activity (Kingore, 2013). Our students know they are good at some activity (drawing, soccer, writing) and so want to repeat that experience. The experience of practicing an instrument is self-motivating because they have learned that practice leads to improvement, but also because the physical act of practicing is rewarding. Most creative endeavors our students participate in have a strong physical element, involving immediate sensory feedback on the degree of success of each action. “Doing something with my hands helps me pay attention” Abby said. This type of challenging, involving, rewarding activity can lead to a feeling of flow, where time falls away and all attention is focused in the moment on a specific activity or task (Csikzentmihalyi, 2008).

Being unmotivated feels restless, disinterested, disengaged. It feels lethargic. It feels like pushing back against a compelling force. It feels like guilt. It feels like anxiety. It feels like distractibility. It feels like incompetence and helplessness. Attention moves to the unhelpful thing that hinders progress and accomplishment. When our students feel unmotivated, they do not know how to shift and become motivated. Being unmotivated is different than wanting to do a different activity than the one at hand. If our students want to play an instrument, or get on-line to check social media, rather than to work on homework, these are still active motivations. They may be triggered by a dislike for a current activity, but this conflict is not necessarily a lack of motivation. It is, instead, an alternative motivation. Being unmotivated is a static inertia, without the means to initiate motion in any useful direction (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Relational motivation. At the beginning of this chapter, I made a distinction between motivation and power, with motivation being an ability to move oneself, and the exercise of power being an attempt to move another. Understood this way, relational motivation is between the self and the self.

Students have a strong sense of self that they think about, shape, and judge. In normal development, adolescence is a stage at which a young person first develops different selves for different situations, and then must work to accept the disunity of these multiple selves and get them to collaborate (Siegel, 2011). This shaping of self is active, not passive. Our students attempt to shape who they are, and who they are shapes the possibilities they see for future shaping. Self-evaluation and judgement are part of this process and have a large effect on their motivation. Therefore, the student relationship with him- or herself must be addressed. I find it particularly telling that in her second interview, Finn specified that her self-talk addressed her in the second person, as “you,” rather than in the first person “I.” This is a dialog, and so is relational.

It is clear that our students place the responsibility for being motivated on their own shoulders. But, often, generating that motivation seems to be an insurmountable hurdle. Our students are sometimes unable to control their attention, direct it as they wish, and maintain it over time to task completion. They attempt to motivate themselves in multiple ways. They procrastinate. They engage in negative self-talk, attempting to browbeat themselves into compliance with a way of being to which they believe they should conform. They bargain with themselves. Most of these techniques mirror extrinsic

motivation techniques they have seen adults use on children or on themselves. Many of the techniques are ineffective or completely backfire (as in the case of procrastination).

The judgement of what will or will not be an effective motivator does not seem to be a rational one, or a consciously reflective one. It is a feeling, and a reflection of who our students believe themselves to be. It is pre-reflective. Mischel (2014) argues that what is needed is a set of techniques to cool the hot (limbic) system of the brain and heat the cool (prefrontal cortex) system of the brain to make cool activities more attractive and hot activities less distractingly attractive. None of the student participants discussed any strategies that would work to accomplish this, other than Otto's use of procrastination to give himself an adrenaline rush. Our students do not see a way that they can control their level of motivation, and they see their lack of motivation as a character flaw, displaying what Dweck (2000) refers to as a "fixed mindset." The contradiction of what they expect themselves to be able to do in terms of self-motivation and what they have experienced success in doing leads to a feeling of helplessness.

Our students focus on the negative, not the positive. They are often able to motivate themselves to practice music, draw, or write, but discount this motivation as less valuable than motivation to do school work. They see these creative activities as fun, so they do not see the strength of motivation to do these things as a reflection of strong character. They feel unable to change and judge themselves to be failures as a result.

Discussion

To better understand the experiences of the study participants, it will be useful to see how these experiences align with current research on motivation. This is a vast area

of study, so I have limited the discussion to four theories which may help bring the picture into focus: a taxonomy of motivation created by Ryan and Deci (2000), self-theories by Dweck (2000), the quadripolar model proposed and tested by De Castella, Byrne, and Covington (2013), and the extensive work of Walter Mischel (2014) and his so-called marshmallow test.

Ryan and Deci (2000) have used self-determination theory (SDT) to give a framework for better understanding types of motivation and how they work. SDT postulates that people have an inherent tendency toward curiosity, learning, self-motivation, growth, and responsibility, but that social environments can cause people to reject this tendency and instead become passive, failing to move toward their own human potential. According to this theory, people have three innate psychological needs that support self-motivation and movement toward personal growth: competence (people need to feel that they can accomplish an attempted task), relatedness (feeling attached to and supported by others), and autonomy (believing that one takes action due to personal choice and belief in the importance of the action—an internal locus of causality).

From this theoretical framework, Ryan and Deci (2000) created a taxonomy for differentiating types of motivation. In the taxonomy, motivation lies on a spectrum of internal locus of causality. At one end, behavior is not self-determined, at the other, it is completely self-determined. If a person has no self-determined behavior, he or she simply doesn't act (amotivation). Extrinsic motivation—"the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71)—is involved in the activities one does even when the process of the activity itself is not its own reward. The

process of integrating extrinsic motivation into one's own values (and thus feeling that the resulting action has some level of internal causality) is called self-regulation.

Ryan and Deci (2000) divide extrinsic motivation into four regulatory styles (degree and ways in which external motivation are internalized).

1. At the low end of extrinsic motivation lies external regulation: those actions which are done to comply with external influence in order to receive reward or avoid punishment.
2. Next is introjected regulation, avoiding guilt and enhancing pride. At this point, the motivated person integrates the external motivation into his or her sense of self to an extremely limited degree. Actions are still seen as taken to please or appease someone else.
3. The third level of extrinsic motivation involves identified regulation, in which the motivated person values the goal or the action, and it is accepted as personally important.
4. At the high end of extrinsic motivation is integrated regulation, involving those activities one has evaluated and decided are in line with one's own values.

Intrinsic motivation is the high end of motivation and is completely autonomous.

The lower on the determination scale a motivation is, the less likely it is that the individual will take action or follow through, and the more outside monitoring is necessary to regulate the behavior. Thus, according to Ryan and Deci's (2000) taxonomy,

motivation is not a unified entity, but a continuum of less effective to more effective ways of spurring action, and the greater control an individual feels in choice of action, the more likely the motivation will be effective.

Dweck (2000) has done extensive research on student motivation, constructing a model of a mastery-oriented mindset in which students believe that their choices and actions influence their achievement, while those with a helpless mindset believe that outside forces—from inherited traits to circumstances—will dictate their outcomes. Her research shows that those who believe their actions influence their outcomes are more likely to exhibit high levels of effort, motivation, and achievement, than those who believe they are helpless. One must believe that one's efforts can change things in order to feel motivation. One must believe that one's choices will have effect. One key feature of Dweck's (2000) self-theories is that these beliefs can change. Input from important people in one's life (including parents and teachers) can help sway a student toward mastery-orientation (by praising hard work, for instance) or toward helplessness (by praising one's talents, looks, or other traits assumed to be inherent rather than in the student's control). People can also take action and thought to effectively change their own self-theories, particularly with appropriate support.

De Castella, Byrne, and Covington (2013) have looked at high and low motivated students in an attempt to model achievement and underachievement. In this model, there are two continuums. Success orientation, associated with motivation, resilience, and enthusiasm for learning, takes up the x axis, with high success orientation on the right and low success orientation on the left. Fear of failure, associated with fear and self-doubt,

takes up the y axis, with high fear of failure at the top, and low fear of failure at the bottom. This divides students into four quadrants, corresponding to four types of students identified in the quadripolar model.

1. Optimists have a low fear of failure and a high success orientation, so they do not engage in harmful deflective strategies. Optimists also have a low sense of helplessness.
2. Overstrivers have a high success orientation, and a high fear of failure. These students tend to have high anxiety and defensive pessimism. While they, like optimists, have low helplessness, they are not resilient, and may burn out.
3. Those with low success orientation and low fear of failure are failure acceptors. They don't use deflective strategies but have low self-esteem and tend toward high helplessness. These students are at risk for losing hope and dropping out of school.
4. At perhaps even greater risks are the self-protectors, who have a low success orientation but a high fear of failure. They engage in both types of harmful deflective strategies: defensive pessimism (artificially lowering expectations of performance when a performance will be evaluated in order to lessen the hurt of failure and turn success into an unexpected surprise), and self-handicapping (generating conditions that will produce an excuse for failure through actions such as procrastination, task avoidance, withholding effort, and other strategies). Self-protectors have the greatest risk for helplessness of all of the four achievement types.

All student participants in the current study (except for George) displayed several types of deflective strategies, and, based on their interviews, most fall into the self-protector quadrant of this model.

Walter Mischel (2014) has spent a lifetime researching this the ability to make the choice to take action, refrain from action, or chose between various actions, (which is tied to motivation). Mischel contends that for an action to be a choice—not simply a genetically programmed reflex—one must accurately perceive actions and consequences and be able to successfully weigh them. He has explored techniques people use to exert self-control, the ability to choose instead of just reacting. He has found that “the effect the stimulus has on us depends on how we represent it mentally” (Mischel, 2014, p. 34). Focus on the “hot” aspects of a stimulus, how it feels to the senses and the emotions one believes acting on the stimulus will immediately invoke, tap into the limbic system of the brain, which is unable to think about long-term consequences. Focus on “cool” aspects of a stimulus, its abstract qualities, taps into the prefrontal cortex, allowing for more considered thought. The hot system acts more quickly than the cool system. Stress activates the hot system and impedes the cool system, making considered, long-term thinking more difficult. This extends to one’s self-representation of willpower. “If you believe that persisting on tough tasks is energizing rather than depleting, [it will] protect you from fatigue” (Mischel, 2014, p. 219).

Several subthemes emerge in the experiences of study participants and motivation. The first is the expectation that students will begin to take control of their own motivation as they enter and progress through high school. This is an expectation

that all participants (students, parents, and teachers) seem to share. Part of this expectation (at least for our parents) is the expectation that students will take on the values and priorities of their parents, the school, and the wider culture. Some of these values and goals include the expectation that our students will eventually become financially self-sustaining (perhaps by getting a good job based on achievement in school), that they will fulfill commitments to others, and that they will prioritize “important” work over entertainment and self-gratification. This can be seen in parent frustration over student seeming inability to prioritize for achievement, and student attempts, particularly at the beginnings of school years, to do things “right” this time, turn around the school experience all at once, to be better students.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), in order to be motivated to conform to these expectations, our students would have to integrate these goals into their sense of values and sense of self. Our students value the idea of doing better in school, but this goal is not actionable. When they sit down to do homework, the action that needs to be motivated is not “doing better in school,” it is “get this homework completed well and on time,” or even, “begin work on problem number 30.” If the goal of doing homework is not valued, motivation falls down to the level of external regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) where it is about getting the reward of a good grade, or avoiding the punishment of lost privileges. This motivation feels separate and imposed from the outside. If it is someone else’s priority, it may also feel like someone else’s responsibility.

The experiences described in this chapter show lots of instances in which participant actions, rather than helping students to feel more competent, supported, and

autonomous, and therefore more able to generate independent motivation, instead make our students feel incompetent, unsupported, and/or controlled. Students may feel incompetent when curriculum pushes forward too fast and they are left behind, desire to change patterns of behavior fail to actually change these patterns, and when they are told they could do better if they just tried. Students may feel unsupported when activities they cherish are treated as unimportant or off task. Students may feel controlled when parents excessively monitor their use of time and their daily or weekly grades, teachers present information in a convergent (one right way) manner, and peers or others pressure them to change their priorities.

Some experiences in this chapter show how participants may be unintentionally creating roadblocks to integration of goals and values, thus lowering motivation autonomy. The most important instance of this is the idea of hoop-jumping or box checking. Our parents have attempted to build understanding and empathy with our students by, in various ways, downplaying the importance of certain schoolwork, communicating that the importance behind this work is to comply with the system for eventual (distant in time) benefits or avoidance of negative consequences, rather than for any inherent value in the work itself. This is problematic from a motivational standpoint. First, rather than encouraging integration, it immediately designates homework (and other similar class demands) as tasks which fall into external regulation, outside of student control or priority, low on the motivation scale. Second, “to take the future into account, we have to heat it, make it imminent and vivid” (Mischel, 2014, p. 146). When framed as hoop-jumping, tasks seem far removed from their eventual consequences, theoretical and

abstract in their impact, while the resentment of wasted time is hot and immediate. This is compounded by the fact that time is a valuable commodity, perhaps especially to those who have intrinsically motivated creative tasks they would rather pursue. Our students, when being asked or told to value a hoop-jumping activity over a creative or any other intrinsically motivated activity may feel this request to overturn their own valued priorities as an affront, or as a dismissal of their own value as a person. (I will explore the connection between sense of self and valuation in depth in the next chapter.) They may hear, “this thing that you value so highly is less important than this thing which I acknowledge is useless except to comply with and please others.”

Hoop-jumping is a problem for teachers as well. Structuring lessons in this way feels necessary to cover required content. But our teachers see how this changes the focus of class away from learning and toward compliance. Student concern may shift from learning material to earning points, a shift from higher autonomy (intrinsic or integrated regulation) to lower motivation (external regulation; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The student becomes dependent on the teacher for the external reward of the grade, a step toward helplessness (Dweck, 2000). Looking at how hoop jumping interacts with the quadripolar model (De Castella et al., 2013), I think that this focus on earning points reflects a high fear of failure. Students may try to gain control of their achievement by tightly tracking requirements and checking IC frequently to see how each grade affects their overall percentage in a class (overstrivers; De Castella et al., 2013). Our students may also have this high fear of failure (as shown through self-handicapping and defensive pessimism behaviors), but by high school, our students have likely developed low success-

orientation, being full of self-doubt. They occasionally—particularly at the beginning of the year—may attempt to reassert motivation and control over their own achievement, mimicking an overstriver, but their resilience is low. While they feel that it is their responsibility to become a better student, to be motivated, to engage in school, to set the right priorities, be organized, and follow through on commitments, they do not know how. It all feels outside their control. They have learned helplessness (De Castella et al., 2013; Dweck, 2000).

Several parents mentioned that they felt that “something is missing.” Our students has amazing abilities, but somehow doesn’t use them, prioritize correctly, follow through, or know how to work. Study participants (parents, students, and some teachers) discussed how they felt motivation was the difficulty. After looking at motivation literature, I feel that this missing piece may be motivation integration. Our students know that the motivation must come from them, but on a fundamental level, they do not know how to control their level of motivation.

Mischel (2014) discusses ways to help increase motivation for desired behaviors and goals and decrease motivation for undesirable behaviors. His focus on the powers of the hot and cool systems (limbic system and prefrontal cortex) explains (if somewhat obliquely) the power of aesthetics in motivation. Sensed qualities of objects that tap into emotional responses (how good steaming hot fudge pored over melting vanilla ice cream makes your mouth water, your nostrils flair with the volatiles rising from the chocolate, and your stomach growl as you anticipate the contrasting textures and tastes when the first bite slides off the spoon and onto your tongue) tap into the hot system quickly and

with a high motivation to action, while abstract sensed qualities (the white rounded blob in the bowl is covered in a slow-moving brown liquid) can be evaluated slowly and do not immediately motivate action. Which of the two bowls of ice cream described do you want to eat?

This is important to this study in two ways. First, it is apparent how strong an influence aesthetic considerations have in motivating student behavior. Second, it is clear that the effect of aesthetic qualities on student behavior is undervalued, ignored, or even treated with contempt by study participants, some of whom judge themselves to be weak because they are subject to the influences of “minor” sensed distractions like heat, crowding, and eraser marks on a page. Yet, aesthetic properties are also motivating, like the look and feel of a new sketchbook. Few participants (if any) seem to truly value the ability to be inspired by the aesthetics of objects and surroundings as a character strength. I found this sad as learning to cultivate inspiring circumstances is one of the ways that eminent creative people find success (Shekerjian, 1990, p. 51).

It is clear that students, parents, and teachers want our students to be more motivated. Our teachers try to create lessons that feel relevant while still meeting curricular requirements. Our parents try to help counter the difficulties our students have “remembering” assignments by offering organizational systems. Our students resolve to “be a better student” this year. But none of the study participants discussed or seemed to be aware of specific techniques for altering motivation levels.

To motivate others may then consist of infusing them with energy, removing obstacles from their path, and illusory obstacles from their perception (Ryan & Deci,

2000). It may mean providing a working model of how to motivate and reward oneself for setting and accomplishing goals (Mischel, 2014). It may involve helping them to incorporate desired goals into their own valuation systems, moving up the motivation scale to higher levels of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Finally, it may mean helping them to change perspective, to find a plausible path through difficulty or challenge, and supporting their resiliency and persistence (Dweck, 2000).

Self-motivation for our students may mean evaluating and eventually accepting or rejecting the goals and values present in surrounding culture and valued individuals, and integrating the accepted goals into their sense of self (Ryan and Deci, 2000). They may then need to connect these goals to specific, accomplishable tasks, and use their imaginations to make the positive consequences more immediate and tangible (“heating” them) while “cooling” the appeal of distractions that don’t further these goals by considering their abstract rather than emotional and aesthetic qualities (Mischel, 2014). Taking on these incremental tasks may help a student to gain a sense of control and competence, reducing helplessness (Dweck, 2000; De Castella et al., 2013) and increasing motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

As long as our students (and the authority figures they love and trust) frame lack of motivation as a character flaw, I believe that tools for increasing motivation will remain out of reach. In high school, our students are at a crossroad of identity, and will need to decide what values to embrace and what to leave behind as they take on the task of shaping who they are. Time is limited, and they cannot remain in limbo forever, poised

between their own values and those they have been given, or they risk failing at all of them.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE LENS OF STUDENT SELF

The sense of who one is, one's sense of self, develops over time, starting with recognizing oneself as a unique being to the development of a sense of mind, a sense of the inner self, the privacy of one's own thoughts, and the idea that one's own motivations and thinking may not match the motivations and thinking of others (Berk, 2012). A child will begin to develop a self-concept, "the set of attributes, abilities, attitudes, and values that an individual believes defines who he or she is," (Berk, 2012, p. 456) around age six. This self-concept becomes more sophisticated and abstract with age. In early adolescence, one becomes aware that one presents a different self depending on context, including who one is with, and may then question, "Who is the real me?" By the end of adolescence, the young adult will usually have "a complex, well-organized, internally consistent picture" of who he or she is, accepting the differences presented in different contexts with a nuanced understanding of a social self (Berk, 2012, p. 459).

Philosophy has wrestled for centuries with the idea of self, from Descartes famous "I think, therefore I am," asserting that the self is real and perceivable, to skeptics mocking the idea of self as necessitating a homunculus (little self) watching sensed information enter and leave the stage in an otherwise empty theater (Hirstein, 2012). Neuroscience may provide a biological answer to this philosophical conundrum. Damasio (1999) presents the problem as one of defining and finding consciousness, which we perceive in two parts, that which we perceive, and that which does the perceiving.

“Consciousness,” he states, “is the unified mental pattern that brings together the object and the self” (p. 11).

Hirstein (2012) distinguishes nuances of what people mean when they use the word self. He begins with the idea that people use (and have used for a very long time) the word *self* to represent a kind of folk psychology understanding, in which the self is similar to a homunculus. The words *I*, *mine*, *me*, and *self* are all in ubiquitous use and refer to a sense of something that is unique (and somewhat stable) about a person that persists over time in a changing world. Even if this is not a well-defined or understood concept, it is a sense that is part of lived experience, and people act, interact, and make judgments of themselves and others based on who they are and who they perceive themselves to be.

Hirstein (2012) presents two other ways of conceiving the self that I find useful for the purpose of this study. The first is the psychological sense of self. “‘Self’ used in this sense refers to a mental entity whose actions we seem to be aware of, perhaps indirectly ... which animates the person’s body in distinctive ways, while preserving the person’s character and personality” (p. 117). He equates this self with the brain’s executive processes, which include perceiving, thinking, deciding, and planning and initiating action. This *self* is also a gatekeeper of awareness and memory, bringing sense to perception, and accepting and processing—or rejecting—information. He also speaks about the self in the representational sense. This is everything from the awareness of where the body is in space to beliefs one has about oneself. “It is clear that the representation and psychological senses of ‘self’ are distinct. The psychological self does

not consist of representations. It is the thing that employs and manipulates the representations” (p. 120). This takes care of the homunculus problem. The psychological self cannot be observed directly, but only in its effects upon representations and actions. It is the wind which moves the leaves, not the leaves themselves.

Currently, many psychologists subscribe to the “big five” theory of personality traits (despite certain bias in the language of the model), measuring the tendencies of the gatekeeper psychological self in action (Lloyd, 2015). These five traits, neuroticism (vs. stability), extraversion (vs. introversion), openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, are fairly stable over time and predictive of certain behaviors (including academic cheating; Giluk & Postlethwaite, 2015). Despite their relative stability, these traits do change over time, and can be changed over time by individuals who desire such change, according to some research (Hudson & Fraley, 2015).

The self, then, is both stable and mutable, a source of behavior and a reaction to circumstance. How one perceives oneself and one’s interaction with the world becomes an important factor in how one shapes who one is in adolescence. Perception is “from the literal sense of *L. percipere*, to take, receive,” also “to become cognizant of ... the taking cognizance or being aware of a sensible or quasi-sensible object” and “in strict philosophical language: ... the action of the mind by which it refers its sensations to an external object that is their cause” (Oxford University, 1971, p. 2127). Executive processes shape perception and are shaped by perception (Damasio, 1999).

As stated earlier, the perceptions and beliefs that compose self-theories have great impact on how motivated, empowered, or helpless a person can feel in life (Dweck,

2000). One can perceive and believe that one's abilities and traits are predetermined and out of one's control, leading one to feel helpless, or one can believe that effort and persistence, even in the face of failure, can help one become better at some task, or even be able to change one's self and how one interacts with the world. This growth mindset or fixed mindset can also seem a stable feature of the self, but it can be changed by interaction with parents and other authority figures, as well as by changing one's own self-talk and habits of thought (Dweck, 2000).

Perception of the self and of the world is a cognitive and judgmental act (Hirstein, 2012). Phenomenologists argue that we, as humans, perceive the world as a series of objects ready-to-hand (availability), with their purpose and usefulness embedded in our apprehension of them (a hammer is for hammering nails or removing them) rather than as objects present-to-hand (occurrence) consisting of only its abstract qualities (a hammer is composed of metal and wood, cool to the touch, gray and brown; Kaufer & Chemero, 2015). When the self is the object of apprehension, it can be informative to question the assumptions of use and permanence/impermanence attached to the self among and between different study participants, as these directly impact their experiences of who they and each other are.

Teacher Experience of the Student Self

The student self and time. Our teachers have been through some training on growth mindset and self-theories. Through this and through the experience of teaching, they have come to see the student self as changeable over time. Without this belief, their

job would be hopeless. Watching the students change and grow over time is what makes teaching worthwhile and keeps our teachers from getting burnt out.

This understanding of the student's changeable self is set against the background of standards and standardized testing, which, at least in the ways that they are implemented at the study site, measure levels of proficiency based on student age and grade level (though there have been some recent changes in math, allowing standardized testing based on the content students are taking instead of their grade level). Yet, Samantha Johnson said, "Every student learns at a different pace ... understanding that they will get there over time has been one of the biggest transitions I have had probably in the last five years of my career." Our teachers may have begun their careers expecting a more lock-step type of learning than what they have experienced in the real classroom.

Content delivery and grading systems have changed over time to allow for differences in learning speed and style from student to student. Our teachers may have tried test corrections (if allowed to do so at certain class levels in certain departments—some departments only allow for test corrections in accommodations level classes), homework corrections, grading or not grading homework, assigning or not assigning homework, various types of group work, and project-based learning. But they are concerned about the effect of all of this flexibility. Helen Lesterman said,

HL: I don't remember having to hold hands like that 15 years ago, but maybe I did, and my memory has just made that disappear, but I feel like the hand-holding is necessary, and maybe some of that is, I don't know, building expectations. I feel like we're expected to give second and third and fourth and fifth chances.

Our teachers wonder if extreme flexibility on their part—and on the part of the school system as a whole—is hurting rather than helping their students learn, particularly if it is harmful to learning soft skills that translate to any situation, such as reading and following directions, meeting deadlines, and taking responsibility.

Time dictating a hierarchy of activity choice. Our teachers are balanced between two goals, goals which they wish were congruent but which often aren't. The first goal is to increase student learning and understanding. The second is to increase student achievement—the outward metrics that are supposed to reflect student learning and understanding. Anyone who has successfully crammed for a test (hoop-jumping) and forgotten most of the material the next day (not learning) can see the difference between these two goals. It is up to the teacher to reconcile the two. Time can be a major impediment to this reconciliation. If they are not reconciled, it is up to the student to choose between them.

Our teachers have seen students figure out that learning and achievement in school are not the same thing. They have seen some students choose to spend their time reaching for the outward metrics of achievement. Faith said,

FB: I think it's the result of our system. You've got to get the grade. ... So, then they've learned this method, and it gets them what they need. [It has negative impacts later] because they have no clue how to do something on their own.

These students become dependent on specific, step-by-step guidance. Helen said,

H: All I get is kids, 'How long does this paragraph have to be? How many sentences in a paragraph,' and I'm like I don't know. If you pick up any fiction book, every paragraph is different, like, I don't think there is an answer to that question, but they think there is.

Our teachers may choose to help students with these expectations by giving them specific and structured activities. Nadia Hook explained,

NH: I model on the board where things should go and what page they should be working on. It seems very well-organized for the most part. I only get one or two where they're not buying into the whole organization thing, and some of them just refuse to do it.... I think it is necessary to have some direction there with organization. It is key to success in a lot of areas.

They may hope that by practicing this modeled structure, our students will transfer this soft skill to other areas.

On the other hand, our teachers may choose to give fewer specific instructions, hoping our students will find their own path. Cody Slade said,

CS: If they are not given specific instruction, they have the chance. Some students will really struggle with that. They're thinking *How do I complete this assignment and get the points?* But sometimes questions are, my questions are open-ended so they don't have to worry about that. If they accept that and they take advantage of that, I think that is a form of creativity.

Our teachers feel that those students who choose achievement over learning are more likely to cheat and less likely to make personal connections with the class curriculum than those who are truly interested in exploring the material. They see this achievement-focus as its own type of underachievement. However, they also see how certain aspects of the school system discourage curiosity and instead promote apathy, once a student has been repeatedly penalized for going outside of dictated assignment steps. Helen said, "So many of them could just be so apathetic. It just doesn't seem like much catches their attention, and I don't know if that's they don't see a connection between what they do in school to like the real world."

This prioritization of compliance over learning seems to our teachers to be built into the system, perhaps even in a historic sense.

CS: This is the industrial education, right, you can do enough to work, although we don't have factories any more, you could do enough to work in a factory. Or you could do enough to work in a customer service job, retail or something like that. Unfortunately, that is just what public education has been, and unless we are willing to spend a lot more money, that is what it will be in the United States. It could be worse, but ... I don't think we're doing as well as we could.

Our teachers see a disconnect between what our schools are designed to do and what students may actually need after graduation. They see that those students who also see this disconnect may be punished, academically, for their subsequent decisions not to comply with a system that may not serve their needs. Our teachers see how this choice variously shapes who our students are, and the paralysis that may result if our students are unaware of this choice, or unable to choose either path without feeling they are endangering who they are.

Does time at school benefit our students' developing self? Our teachers see a bad fit between our students and the school system of which our teachers are a part. Our teachers begin to question whether and in what ways the school system is actually of benefit to our students' developing self. Our teachers are conflicted on this point. On one hand, Cody asserts, "I think that the traditional model discourages creativity." On the other hand, our teachers believe in the importance of their job and the reality of their own contribution to individual students and society by being a teacher. Cody also said,

CS: From an individual standpoint, to me, education is part of it, the idea of giving everybody an opportunity. So, in general, I would say I like to do things that give kids an opportunity maybe that nothing else does, whether it is just simply learning something interesting and new, or something that is more

practical, that can help them become a better learner and help them become a better citizen, becoming a better student.

Our teachers attempt to find ways to better match our students' needs, where they are right now in themselves. Nadia explains, "I feel like we need to spend more time on student mental health. I think if we could have more ways to help students with their mental health, that would help them perform better in school." They may change their assignments or information delivery to break away from conventional sit-and-get rote learning, targeting assignments to make teaching more efficient and student-centered. Regardless of what they have tried, our teachers often feel that there is more to do. Faith said,

FB: There are kids that just [have] over the top abilities, but we have no way in our education system to measure that. We can measure the logical mathematical, and we can measure the linguistics, but the rest of them, there's nothing in place for that, and so we fail those kids all the time.

The student self and space. Our teachers are aware that some students don't thrive in a conventional classroom. They attempt to make the room welcoming by giving it an aesthetic personality, hanging motivational sayings, student work, maps and other resources, posters, colors, as well as bringing in comfortable furniture, all of this to help convey who our teachers are so that our students know our teachers from the space. This type of communication is becoming harder as classrooms fill and overflow, with teachers traveling between rooms, unable to put a personal stamp on a teaching space.

Our teachers also try to promote student autonomy by making sure other resources are readily available to students whenever they need them. They post an agenda for the day's lesson on the board, provide storage space in their room for students who

might otherwise forget textbooks, notebooks, or other work. They have bins of colored pencils, glue, and scissors where students can reliably access them. Our teachers also make an effort to limit distractions, whether these distractions are ones brought in by the students, such as their phones, or inherently present in the class, by limiting movement of students during quiet work time so that they don't distract each other and promoting movement during group work and other times to keep blood flowing and provide brain breaks, for instance. Samantha even installed a subtle scent dispenser in a wall outlet. These modifications to the classroom space are designed to help our students feel comfortable and increase level of student autonomy.

The feel of each classroom is affected by its furniture. Most student desks were purchased by the district years ago. They have hard plastic chairs and small faux-wooden desks permanently attached at a fixed distance. A hodge-podge of these from different era's, in different colors and slightly different styles are in each classroom, scrounged from furniture stored in the basement that our teachers have retrieved a few desks at a time as classes have grown from 24 to 34 students. Our teachers may have augmented or substituted these desks with trapezoidal tables that are more conducive to group work and at least let long-legged students sit a bit more comfortably. Occasionally, our teachers may spend department or personal funds for bean bag chairs, couches, or other softer seating for special areas in the room to better meet individual student needs. Our teachers see how space affects our students and do what they can to individualize the space, but limited square footage keeps classroom spaces feeling overcrowded. This space

restriction, in addition to budget restraints, limit how much our teachers can customize areas of their room for different and less conventional activities.

The perception of student self and body. Our teachers are unable to experience the student self directly in the body but must, instead, come to understand who students are through their behavior, what they do with their bodies while in our teachers' presence. This reveals who our students are. This is fundamentally a relational perception. However, once our teachers feel they know who our students are, this can come to be a judgement of the fundamental unchanging aspects of the student. These behavior patterns reside inextricably in our teachers' perception as part of the body of the student through their observed behavior. Though these self-traits seem fundamental and immutable at the time of judgement, our teachers' perception and judgement of the student at any given moment may be different than their perception the moment before or the moment after. So, these perceived permanent selves are changeable, and only experienced as permanent in a fleeting moment. Our teachers perceive our students in the following ways.

Slacker. Our students are slackers and don't care. They won't finish assigned work. It is not that they can't, or that they don't understand expectations or material. They have the ability. They just won't do the work.

I think it is important to note that the word "lazy" was not used by teacher participants. Samantha said specifically that the problem was not laziness, but low self-esteem, and that no student wanted to do poorly. Roger Starbucks, however, made a clear distinction between those students who struggled with understanding and those who simply didn't want to work. Explicitly negative language about who a student is tended to

be used when teachers felt helpless and exhausted, and when they seemed to need emotional distance from their felt obligation to educate particular problem students. I suspect this distancing is an attempt to mitigate feelings of guilt and protect themselves from potential burn out or from neglecting other students. While teachers tended to make a distinction between lack of work completion and the student self except when feeling strong emotions, students consistently reported that they assumed teachers thought they were lazy.

Untrustworthy. Our students are untrustworthy. They are just interested in doing the minimum to get the points. If that means cheating or lying, they will do it. It doesn't seem that they even see it as wrong, if they don't get caught. When they do get caught, they may try to lie to get out of it. Even if they are perfectionists—sometimes especially if they are—Samantha said,

SJ: I think they are very dependent and they don't want to take a risk, and then I think sometimes they want to take shortcuts to get there. I think those are our kiddos that we see take that cheating route a little more, unfortunately.

Disengaged. Our students are disengaged with school and the process of schooling. Helen said,

HL: What I see ... their body language and the signals I see in class would make me vote apathy, probably more than [perfectionism]. ... And I'm sure there are a few [perfectionist] kids, definitely, but collectively, as a whole, I guess that's how I interpret my freshmen this year.

Our apathetic student is exhausting to work with because nothing our teachers can do seems to have an impact.

Smart. Our students are smart and/or have other strong abilities. They have simply decided not to apply them to school. Their brilliance emerges at unexpected times and in unexpected ways and is hard or impossible to access at other times.

Disorganized. Our students are disorganized. They can't remember where things are, what is due, or how far they have progressed on completing assignments or understanding material. Our teachers attempt to help our students with organization, but our students always seem to find new ways to bring chaos to their own lives.

Perfectionism. Our students are perfectionists. For them,

HL: Sometimes it's easier to just not do it ... because of the power of the grade, and parents and all that, I think it gets them to do something, but yeah, why do it at all if you can't do it 120 percent, right?

Our teachers wonder, if our students are constantly worried about these unreasonable expectations, how can they get started on anything? They must be afraid all the time.

Creative. Our teachers see that creativity is part of who our students are, and that this can be a help or a hindrance in school. Our teachers have expressed that creative students may be more focused on learning than on achievement, and that this can harm their grades.

The student self and relationships. Our teachers feel that creating a strong relationship with their students is the cornerstone of teaching, particularly teaching students who have difficulty in school. They work hard to make themselves approachable while maintaining a professional relationship with students. This requires a fine line between privacy and revelation, as well as lots of listening and picking up on nonverbal cues from the individual students and the class as a whole. Our teachers may take time

for “get to know you” activities or may simply take the time to greet students by name as they enter the class, ask them about extracurricular activities or other things happening in their lives. Our teachers want our students to know that they care, and that they see them as individuals. They know that our students may have difficulty trusting school authority figures, and so they may take extra time to build these relationships, attempting to lead our students into engagement with class content by engaging them on a personal level. They understand their obligation to teach curriculum but also see their job as preparing students for the world after high school. Relationships are key to this part of teaching.

In looking at what will prepare our students for success in school and beyond it, our teachers are aware that teaching only what is covered in content standards is not enough. Increasingly, they have felt the need to teach “soft skills” directly, as well as imbedding them in other lessons. They have seen our students struggle to be organized, get to classes on time, contribute in groups, navigate social situations appropriately, and to turn work in on time, complete, and done to the best of their ability without shortcuts or cheating. These soft skills are necessary to complete school successfully, and our teachers once expected most of them to be in place by the time our students entered high school. Our teachers have found this expectation to be woefully inaccurate. Samantha said,

SJ: I think as time has gone on I’ve invented [ways to teach soft skills and self-reflection]. Coming from the other district that I was in before, that became almost the primary role that I had. It wasn’t teaching math to those kiddos, it was teaching them how to be productive citizens and students and that kind of thing, so I feel very blessed to be thrown into that situation first, but I definitely felt like I was drowning at first, because there wasn’t that adequate training.

Our teachers have a strong sense of obligation to teach these soft skills and help students who underachieve. But our teachers experience the underachievement as two extremes on a continuum of student self. Roger said,

RS: It all depends on if said underachieving student is intentionally underachieving, because they are slacking, and they just don't care, or if they're underachieving because they have a learning disability or because they just don't get it. And I'll tell you; there is a difference. It is frustrating to work with the ones that just don't care and that's why they're underachieving. The ones that are achieving stuff as far, or underachieving and they care but they just don't get it, that's very rewarding ... because usually once they get it ... it builds their confidence, and it teaches them how to think out of the box and more problem-solving.

On one side our students may have low skills in one area or another (often in soft skills as opposed to those tied in with specific subject matter). Our teachers see this in repeated instances of disorganization, difficulty beginning tasks, and/or difficulty remembering to complete or turn in work. Watching a student's consistent disorganization is frustrating, but our teachers do not feel this is an insurmountable problem. They can take action to remedy—or at least mitigate—this issue. They can provide alternative organizational strategies, like letting students use three-ring binders instead of comp books for science notebooks, allowing them to keep assignments or textbooks in the classroom, or letting them place reminders in their phones. If our students have trouble starting activities, our teachers can take steps to re-direct their attention (perhaps taking away a cell phone or separating students who are distracting each other) or clarify expectations verbally, by providing written instructions, or by breaking down the beginning of a process into smaller steps. If our students have trouble remembering to turn in work, our teachers begin to remind them more often than their

peers and may call home to recruit help from a parent. All these situations require extra effort from our teachers, but they are also an expected part of the job. Our teachers may become momentarily frustrated at this end of the spectrum, but judgements of the student self tend toward phrases such as “she is just disorganized,” or “I always have to remind him about deadlines,” rather than condemnations of the entire student as a person.

In the middle of the spectrum of perceived student self are those with low self-confidence and high perfectionism. If our teachers see an underachiever with low self-esteem, they still feel some sense of agency: they feel that there are strategies that they can use to help. They can check in with our students frequently, working on building a strong, trusting relationship. They hope that this will help our students believe positive feedback and incremental successes when our teachers point them out. This relationship trust may also help our students trust our teachers’ judgement when perfectionism becomes an issue. Our teachers may share personal stories of how they may have dealt with similar issues or attempt to help our students change their inner dialog. Nadia said,

NH: Perfectionism, some of that is society, with the perfectionism, society is, kind of like what I’m saying with that mindset, that you are always going to be perfect. It is not an attainable thing. I catch students all the time, “I’m not good at Science, I can’t do it.” I’m like, “I wasn’t good at Science when I first started either. You have to start somewhere.” So those things, and I’ve told students before, too, that I’m not smart, I just work hard. You don’t have to be smart or see yourself as smart. I don’t know, I mean as far as IQ goes, if I were to take an IQ test, I’m not high on the IQ level, whatever. I try to encourage more of that inner strength of problem-solving and positivity and working through things and learning from mistakes.

In the middle of the spectrum, our teachers still have hope. But the middle of the spectrum is also where our teachers may begin to run out of ideas or energy. They may

not have the proper training to recognize or help when a student is battling with a negative inner voice. They may become frustrated or feel helpless when their efforts seem to have little impact on achievement over time.

HL: Under-achievement [manifests as] kids refusing to read. Or maybe they'll read in class but won't finish a story to save their life outside of class. And that gets frustrating, because if you just read the stories, the class is easy. If you don't read the stories it can become very hard.

At the far end of the spectrum of self our teachers perceive our students as apathetic and/or defiant. Samantha explained,

SJ: I think failing at a young age, and just kind of shutting it out after that, and just kind of giving up hope a little bit. You know, they were bad at adding fractions in sixth grade, therefore they are bad at math for the rest of their lives.

This is the point at which our teachers may begin to think, *There is nothing I can do to help this student*. Our students may cheat or lie, may take short-cuts to attempt to get points without doing assigned work, or may simply fail to do anything in class. While our teachers impose consequences for dishonest behavior, they are sure that they are not catching all of it, and this can feel like a losing battle. If they teach an elective, they expect that such a student will eventually self-select out of the subject all together. If they teach a core class, this may not be an option for teacher or student. Our teachers may begin to withdraw energy from working with that student, conserving it to help others in the class. They may create emotional distance and justification for this by judging our students to be a slacker, apathetic, impossible, or simply a bad kid. Our teachers may see this level of student disengagement as a choice, even if they acknowledge the part that school institutions may have played in shaping this choice during their more reflective

moments. Because it is a choice our students are making, it is their fault, and up to them to fix it. It is out of our teachers' hands. Helen remembers,

HL: When I think to when I started at this school, you know how your memories from 15 years ago become more rosy? You can't trust your memories, but I just feel like I didn't struggle. ... I'm so exhausted at the end of gold days, ... and what exhausts me is their inability to follow the most basic directions. I can say go to Canvas, look in today's module, click on this, and that will be up there. I'll go through it, I'll read it twice, and I spend the next five minutes going from computer to computer helping kids find these things. ... I feel like we're expected to ... work harder almost than the students.

This feeling, that "I am working harder than the students," is the essence of what our teachers feel when working with our students. It is a combination of exhaustion, of helplessness, of inability to change the situation, and a feeling that the expectations within the situation are unfair. Our teachers feel responsible for something that they see as fundamentally outside of their control, and eventually begin to resent the situation. It is the hope of being able to make a positive impact on student lives that invigorates our teachers and keeps them coming back to work every day. Being unable to make such an impact when it is so obviously needed is draining. Breaking through and actually making a difference for our students after long struggle, then, is doubly rewarding, but it is rare.

Our Parents and the Student Self

The perception of student self and time. There is a gulf between childhood and adulthood, and it resides in time. A high school student begins to feel impending adulthood, stretching for independence while still reaching for the safety and security of home. A parent remembers what this felt like, but the memory may have been changed and overwritten by time. Perception of self may be distorted by memory. Memory of the

past parent self may be vividly clear, while convincing a child of the truth of this empathy may seem unattainable. The gulf of time separates our parents and our students, even as they exist together moment by moment.

Parent perception of student time sense.

T: Rather than just doing what's hard in small chunks, day after day after day, ... he'll realize at the end of a semester, *Oh, my gosh, I have not done what I needed to do, and I'm going to have to get caught up.* And it's two or three weeks' worth of marathon.

Our parents worry about our students' interaction with time. They find our students to be poor judges of time, timeliness, and how to budget enough time to complete necessary tasks, generally underestimating how much time tasks will take. They also worry that our students have a poor sense of how much time they waste online and otherwise interacting with digital games, activities, and social spaces.

E: My opinion is he grossly overestimates what he's doing, and he grossly underestimates what needs to be done, and then pretty much every year, I would say at least all the way through middle school and up until now, with the exception of maybe one or two semesters.

Our parents worry that our students are so caught up in the moment, in what they are doing or want to be doing right now, that they don't keep track of commitments and the time it will take to fulfill them, as well as how longer term goals and ambitions need to be broken down into shorter term decisions about prioritizing use of time. This also makes it particularly difficult for our students to recover from class time missed due to illness.

Our parents may see this interaction of student self and time as some awareness that is missing. They see missing work, difficulty in making up missed work, poor

organization, and misplaced partially completed assignments. Our parents have a degree of hope that our students will develop an awareness of the big picture, how small choices about use of time can build into large accomplishments (or holes to work oneself out of). If our parents have an older student (second semester of junior year or in their senior year) this hope may be starting to bear fruit.

H: It's been pretty gradual. I will say it's been gradual for the last three years. This year it's been a pretty sudden change. She's also got a job and I think that responsibility on top of everything else just helps her organize herself more. She's only got so much time to devote to different things.

An increase in time pressure has helped our students to become more organized and use their time better.

Our parents may, instead, see difficulties with time use as a lack of work ethic. Edward said, "He has no problems making the commitments, but after he's made the commitments and it's time to do the work that is associated with it, nah, not so much. That drives me insane." Our parents are beginning to see this difficulty with time use as a character trait, one that may relate to how our students prioritize their own judgement over the judgements of our parents or other adult authority.

E: I think it is natural for him to think, or to assume that he can do what he wants to do, kind of as long as he wants to do it, and that his reasoning is equal to our reasoning, or somebody else's reason that is an authority, and that if your reasoning doesn't agree, or my reasoning doesn't agree with his reasoning, then you're being unreasonable, right?

Our parents still attempt to help our students prioritize school work, but this can be difficult if our students insist that they have no homework whenever they are asked.

When our parents start to feel that a lack of work ethic is or is becoming a character trait, they may begin to equate bad use of time with overall laziness. Megan said, “I don’t know what the homework piece is. I think it could be laziness, like she just doesn’t want to sit down and put time into it.”

Deslisle and Galbraith (2002) draw a distinction between lacking skills to do an activity that will help with school achievement (underachievement) and deciding not to do such an activity (selective consumerism). Our parents may have difficulty distinguishing between the two phenomena, though they can see that lack of achievement could be from lack of skills or from work refusal. Our parents see selective consumerism as a more serious problem because it seems a character flaw, either low work ethic or lack of integrity.

Short term choices are narrowing long term opportunities. As our parents watch our students use time in ways that contribute to underachievement, they experience a feeling of loss. Our parents see—in a way that they believe our students may not—how these little decisions compound to narrow future opportunities and choices. Otto once wanted to be an astronaut, and his parents believed in his ability to do it. His father explained,

E: But I think he’s starting to realize that he has closed the door on some things. It’s difficult to say, but even at this age, high school, it’s not gone well. It’s been a struggle, and I think he’s probably closing doors on things that he thought he wanted to do for a long time, and it’s just really not possible now.

This difference in ability to anticipate how current action will impact future events is part of what separates adults from children (Berk, 2012), and why we hold them

in protection, prioritizing our judgement over theirs for 18 years. Part of what our parents see as underachievement is the seeming delayed development of this perception of a “big picture” and the ability to allow that perception to precipitate action. Our parents may, therefore, attempt to substitute their own judgement for that of their child, leading to conflict, which will be discussed further in the relational filter of this chapter and also in Chapter 8.

The student self and space. Our parents have seen how context changes the student self. Grades, reports from teachers, and student behavior have all shown our parents how our students change from space to space. Teachers tell them that our students pay attention, work well, and complete work while in the class space (for the most part). But our parents have seen how, once home, our students resist doing school work, forgetting assignments, insisting there is no homework, and refusing to study for tests. Our parents have heard our students complain about in-school work that focusses on revealing the self, particularly if these assignments will later be shared with the class. They have seen our students’ isolation at school, their reluctance to let others see them in that place. Our parents are acutely aware of our students’ need to assert boundaries and privacy, though they feel the need to intrude on that private space in order to ensure that necessary work gets done. This can then backfire. Katie explained, “If you say, ‘Do you have homework?’ She won’t do it, because you mentioned it. She’s like, ‘I would have turned that in, but you asked me about it.’” Our students may see this as a violation of autonomy, trust and privacy, but our parents may consider monitoring of work in a communal space as a necessary protective reaction to a choice our students have made

over time by not completing work under other conditions and in private spaces such as their room.

Our parents may also have seen a move from one home to another, one town to another, or one school to another have a negative effect on our students' achievement. Elizabeth remembered, "Sixth grade ... he actually was on honor roll. Then, of course, we moved." Though the parents in the study didn't discuss these moves at length, and not all participants had moved, moving seemed to be universally detrimental to student achievement, at least in the short term.

The student self and the body.

Separation of parental self and student self. Part of our parents' exhaustion stems from confusion and inability to understand why our students are behaving this way.

E: I'm like, it doesn't make sense that this is happening. It doesn't make sense to me that this is happening. Or it doesn't make sense to me why you're [the student] doing what you're doing or why you're not doing what you're doing. You should just get this, and there is nothing that I need to do to change this. This is your problem.

At this point, our parents may feel that nothing they can do will change our students' behavior. It is entirely in our students' hands. But what if that isn't enough? Elizabeth said, "I mean he has to know that he has homework, or does he not consider studying for a test homework? I mean he has to know." But maybe not. *Maybe*, our parents think, *if I don't keep trying, my child will not pick up any of the slack, and then what will happen?*

All the effort to help rests on a bedrock of love and fear. Elizabeth continued,

EI: I've told him. I've said, "[If] you don't get your grades better, I have to see your grades better. I have to see you taking more initiative before you get to drive a car. What are you going to do when you're out on your own? You want to go to

college. Are you going to study? A teacher is not going to come and tell you to study.” So I’ve made these points to him, but I don’t know.

Our parents worry, *What will my child do when I am not there to do it for them?*

This feeling, that our parents must keep pushing to fend off disaster, that they must stay thoroughly involved in our students’ life, choices, and responsibilities, at a time when the culture expects students to begin taking on more and more responsibility for themselves, is experienced as a unity of self between our parents and our students. Our parents may wonder if they have become overinvolved in their child’s life. Teri said,

T: There’s times I think it might better for me and better for them, at times, if there’d been more, if I had a little something on the side that was my own, but to be able to, rather than me being totally focused on just that, because I think you have to nurture yourself as well. You’re happier as a person, as a parent, if you do.

A lack of separation between parent and student also came across in unconscious use of the words *we* and *our* when referring to student actions and responsibilities.

Elizabeth said, “It is organization because we can’t get organized to save our life.”

Throughout the interview, she and several other parents used *we* instead of *he* or *she*. The student self is only experienced as a partially autonomous entity.

Feelings about student underachievement. Our parents have a high opinion of their child’s innate abilities, and a complex understanding of who their child is. This sense of who our students are in opposition to their behavior and accomplishments is source of confusion and helplessness for our parents.

Our parents see our students’ strengths. Our students are smart. Elizabeth said, “I know it’s in him. I know he can do this. He’s a smart kid.” Our students are talented.

Gene said, “She is such a good writer, just phenomenal.” Our students are good people. Teri said, “Overall, he’s a really good kid.” Our students can focus, when they want to. Gene said, “It’s like a switch. Either its full throttle, she’s so into something, or it’s completely off, and she does nothing.”

Our parents see our students’ weaknesses. Katie said, “She’s always been so stubborn, and I’ve always told her there’s good stubbornness and bad stubbornness.” Our students are shy. Melody said, “You call on him, directly, he’s not going to offer [the answer on his own].” Our students may have a learning disability. Elizabeth described the process of Steve’s identification,

El: [He was] diagnosed with ADD, and it’s more of the inattentive, but, yes, vision. Vision started it, making sure he was in front of the class. From there the teacher noticed a lot of fidgeting, my pencil is on the ground, my paper is on the ground, I’m staring at the ceiling.

Our students lack self-confidence. Megan said,

M: She just doesn’t believe in herself, and you can sit there all day and tell her, “You’re very talented. You’re an amazing musician. You’re a very talented artist. You’re a great writer.” And no, she’ll rip up, delete. She doesn’t want to hear it, and the more I think I try to tell her that stuff, because I really am honestly impressed by her, the less she wants to hear it. I think she wants to hear it, so she can tell me I’m wrong, and no, she’s not any of those things.

Our parents see our students as sensitive, emotionally and in terms of heightened reactions to sensory input like texture and smell. Megan knows that Finn felt horribly bullied in elementary school but felt that Finn’s peers were not behaving in any way out of the ordinary. It was Finn who took it hard. Teri described Otto as emotionally “sensitive.” Many parents described their children’s difficulties with loud noises, clothing

tags, and restrictive shoes. Our parents may see these reactions as a vulnerability in our students, making it difficult for them to ignore distractions or shrug off negative input.

Our parents don't necessarily see how these weaknesses manage to overcome these strengths. This leaves them bewildered and helpless. They don't see how student ability becomes so disconnected from student action. Edward said, "We tell him, 'You are smart enough. You have all the ingredients, you just need to start baking the damn cake.'"

Some of the issue may be a difference in personality type or priorities between our students and their teachers. Katie explained,

K: Bella had really struggled that year. She had a very type A teacher, and we are not. We are very scattered... We're daydreamy people, and it's hard for us to be in that structured, you know, A, B and C world.

But this doesn't explain everything that is happening. Our parents don't see how our students manage to choose to not do well, to not follow through on obligations. Elizabeth said, "I know he can do it but, I'm trying to think. We just *don't* do it is basically what it comes down to." Edward talked to Otto about the possibility of getting a GED instead of a high school diploma as, "a matter of self-preservation. That's not what we want for him, but if it's just going to be, if we're going to fight, we're going to slog it out nightly, or weekly, for the next two years, I'm not interested."

Dual perception of the student self. Our parents see a disconnect between their own high opinion of our students' abilities and what our students produce, finish, or in other ways achieve in school. They see that our students, though they may appear arrogant and self-assured, actually suffer from anxiety and low self-esteem. "There's two

sides to him,” Edward said. “In spite of all his self-confidence, I think he’s extremely insecure.” Our parents see how this insecurity has a direct impact on our students’ ability to function in the school system. Megan said, “It’s that thing where she’s afraid she’s going to fail, and she doesn’t even try, and her mind kind of shuts off.” This can lead to a downward spiral that our parents see but don’t know how to stop.

E: I think he knows that he’s, there’s a part of him that wants to do what he is capable of doing, and he knows that he should be, and he knows how to do it, but it is not enough. It’s not enough to override the self-confidence and to drive him to do those things, so it’s like this vicious circle. *I know I’m supposed to be these things, and I’m smart enough to do them, but then I don’t do them, so I feel bad about myself, so then, because I feel bad about myself, I don’t see any reason to do the things, and it’s just a circle.*

Our parents perceive two selves in one when looking at their child: one is the potential child; one is the defeated child. Our parents have lowered expectations over time, meeting the child that is, not the child that could have been, and may feel disappointment, disapproval, and worry, all of which our students can sense, and which may compound the cycle.

This low self-esteem can deteriorate into self-destructive behavior. Our parents can see this in little ways, like our students’ refusal of help with homework and organization. When it goes beyond this, our parents may seek professional mental health counseling for our students.

M: I think it has helped her define, to sort of recognize the issues she struggles with, like self-image. She has a really negative self-image, to the point where she is a small girl and she’s counting calories and that sort of thing, and so I really try to watch that, because I know that can go down some definitely terrible roads. Just obsessed with her hair. If it’s a bad hair day she’s going to have a bad day, so she’s very conscious of her appearance and she sees things wrong with her that

other people don't see, so I think counseling kind of helped her understand that she has a little bit of possibly body dysmorphia.

Or our parents may look on, not knowing what to do to guide our students to a less destructive path, but instead simply bracing for expected negative patterns.

E: Every year you could find [Otto] finding his arch nemesis. The kid he loved to hate. They couldn't stand each other, but they were inseparable. Every stinking day, there was something. I was like, Who is it going to be this year?

The perception of student self and relationships. Our students were once dependent on our parents for everything: life, food, shelter, clothing, guidance and love. Now, our students are at the point of breaking away, standing on their own, and moving forward to a more independent life. Throughout this time, it has been our parents' roll to prepare our students for this independence. Our parents have been helping to shape the student self.

Our parents have various goals and values they hope they have succeeded (but may feel they have failed) in imparting to their child. They have taken pains to present opportunities to be well-rounded. They have tried to explain how to fulfill obligations and why this is important. They have tried to model the importance of prioritizing school, even if they did not consider school important at the same age. They feel proud if they have seen this effort pay off. John reflected,

J: You take a kid like George without any parental support, that wouldn't have been good. He would have just barely been getting through school. School wouldn't have meant anything to him, or got anything out of it, Cs and Ds and Fs, just getting tracked through, whatever the term is. I'm sure there's a lot of that going on, unfortunately.

When our students don't reflect these values and goals in action, our parents get frustrated and may not know what to do. Our parents may begin to limit our students' choices to ones they believe are within our students' abilities, as Teri and Edward did:

T: Early on we looked at [a nearby charter school], and they have a lot of language classes and more chemistry and biology and robotics and things like that, and that's really why I was looking at them.

E: He played with some kids that were going to go [there], and he started to express some interest in [the charter school], we took a look at it and we were like, "That is not an environment that is going to work for you. You think you're having trouble now, wait till you go someplace where the expectations are a lot higher."

Our parents (or their spouses) may be away from home quite a bit. Activities from teaching night classes, traveling for work, or even working on building a new house may keep our parents away in the evenings, often leaving our students unsupervised. Our parents believe our students take advantage of their absence, not completing homework obligations until our parents come home to check in and make sure our students are doing what they are supposed to.

Parental mental health issues may also have an impact. Katie believes her own depression caused Bella to be withdrawn. Katie describes her relationship with Bella as "codependent and caught up in trying to control everything," but says that things have been improving in the last two years.

Feelings of distance may be complicated by divorce, as with Megan and Finn:

M: She's with me all the time. She used to spend every other weekend with her dad, but she doesn't any more. She just goes over there now and then, and that has actually helped their relationship, the less she is over there, and it's less him than ... she doesn't get along with her stepmom at all and doesn't feel like her dad is on her side at all, so their relationship has actually improved, now that she's not around there.

No matter the particulars of the individual situation, our parents love our students, worry about them, want them to succeed, and try to influence their choices toward academic success, as well as toward developing a hardworking character, to become people who can be relied on to fulfill whatever obligations they take on to the best of their ability. Our parents are our students' exasperated protector, cheerleader, nag, and model.

When systems don't work. Our parents believe that one of the reasons that our students seem unable to use their abilities to achieve is that they lack the habits, systems, and organization to turn ability into quality work. This, in itself, wouldn't be as much of a problem if our students asked, or were willing to accept, help in these areas. But either our students believe their existing methods work fine, or just having someone else involved in helping with this aspect of getting stuff done is somehow offensive or counterproductive, or both, our parents aren't sure which. Elizabeth describes Steve's disorganization,

El: Once it's in the jumble it's lost because I'll tend to find it at the bottom of the bag, ... In health [class] I was trying to get him to put away all these papers. They've had a lot of papers this quarter. I'm like, "Let's put them in your notebook." "No, if I put them in there I'll forget where they are." "But that's where they belong because she's going to do a notebook check and you just have them all thrown in your notebook and some of them are in your backpack." ... I don't know.

Clearly, our students are not organizing successfully, but the idea of following their parents' or teachers' suggested organization system is something they believe will make things worse. Our parents are left uncomprehending.

Our parents may believe that our students' confidence in his own failing systems is at the root of the problem. Teri and Edward explained,

T: Kind of faulty reasoning sometimes. I wouldn't say that his confidence doesn't serve him well; I think that it does, in some cases I think it does, but I think...

E: I think right now it doesn't. It may in the future, but I think right now it's kind of his Achilles heel.

T: I think it would be more beneficial for him to be more ...

E: More humble.

It may boil down to simple defiance of perceived interference. Several parents described incidents in which their children refused to do homework *because* a parent asked about it or tried to see it. I will discuss this behavior, which may be a manifestation of psychological reactance, a reaction to attempted power use, in Chapter 8. This resistance to offered help may also come from our students' understanding of their own needs in order to learn.

K: I asked her, "Can't daddy help you with that?" And she's like, "No, because that's when I learn it. ... Somebody can talk to me about it forever, and I don't get it until I'm doing it, and then it comes to me."

However, for this type of learning to work, our students must decide to engage with the material in the first place.

The work doesn't get done; if it is done, it gets lost or in some other way is not turned in. Our parents agonize over the fact that our students seem unable or unwilling to engage and complete work. Regardless of the trigger or underlying reason, our students' systems aren't working. Their resistance to our parents' attempts to help render these attempts fruitless and make our parents confused, exhausted, and hurt, but unwilling to

give up. Our parents will continue to try and give systems to our students or engage them in inventing or using systems of their own.

Trust and distrust. Our parents want our students to be people of integrity. They believe their child is basically a good person. They want to trust them, and for them to trust in return. But our students' behavior puts a strain on that trust. Once again, our parents end up with a dual image of who our students are: a good, honest, caring person, and someone who deliberately deceives our parents. Our parents must live in hope that our students will eventually become people of integrity, but this hope is placed under repeated strain.

The interaction is cyclical. Our parents know that our students have struggled in the past, so decide to check on our students' progress. They check IC or ask our students if they have any homework, or both.

M: She does get home first, and she'll say she's started [her homework]. I want to look at it. "Well, no, it's online. I have it saved in a Word document," or Google or whatever, wherever it's at. I never get a straight answer, and then if I push her on it, I'll find like, "Okay, I started it, but it's not done, and I'm going to finish it later." And there have been times where I've sat down at the table with her, and said, "We're going to do homework, and we're not getting up, and she'll just sit there and not do homework."

Trust is now diminished. Our parents' trust goes down as our students evade or outright lie. This is made worse as our parents are unsure if it is true dishonesty or simply lack of organization. Gene asked, "How do you sort out when it's kind of intentional versus, thinking out here that it just goes whoosh, past you, and not getting it turned in?" Our parents are not sure which conclusion to act on and may feel our students are taking advantage of this uncertainty to make more bad choices and evade parental scrutiny. Teri

said, “If you really give him a lot of gray, he kind of takes advantage of that, and he will work it.” Our parents feel the weight of the effort they have put in, trying to help our students, and become exasperated.

T: Because he will tell you a lie, to cover up. He’ll say, “Oh, yeah, I got that turned in.” And you find out a week later or so that it isn’t turned in, or isn’t done, those types of things, so we struggle with integrity, you know, with him.

Anger and frustration over dishonesty vie with worry and compassion as our parents watch our students give up.

M: It was that whole “I don’t even want to try.” So she’d say, “I don’t have any homework,” or, “I did it,” or, “I turned it in.” And then, clearly, we’d go to conferences and get grades and that wasn’t the case.

Our parents see our students drowning and see them choose to turn away from those things that would help. This further undermines our parents’ trust in our students’ judgement.

Peer to peer relationships and student self. Our parents see our students as somewhat isolated. Elizabeth said, “I don’t see him with a lot friends.” This isolation may have improved since entry into high school, in which case our students’ friend group is usually small, perhaps tight-knit, and may shift sometime in the high school years.

These close friends are not the only students whose actions and opinions matter to our students.

M: She’s pretty self-conscious. She cares a lot about social acceptance, and so I think she started to strive more for that, rather than paying attention. ... She didn’t get those basic concepts down because she wasn’t paying attention to that sort of thing ... just trying to pass notes and stuff like that, and that has just continued.

Our parents have seen that our students feel a difference between themselves and their peers, and they are either attempting to bridge that gap or protect themselves from it.

T: I wouldn't necessarily [say he] takes pride in it, but in some ways, you want to have an identity, right? And he will say stuff like, if kids had to describe him, I'm kind of icy. I think he kind of takes a little bit of, you've got to have some sort of identity, right? ... If there is a kid who is, I guess by today's definition, is more successful—they might get a better grade; maybe they're a better athlete; they're a little more popular or something like that—he will almost inherently not like that kid. And I think a lot of it, yeah, there are some kids who are popular and maybe they get really good grades or they're really good athletes, and they're just snots, quite honestly, right? And I'm like, I can totally get why you wouldn't like that person. But there have been other kids that they're just nice kids who just happen to be good students or good athletes at the same time, and he don't want nothing to do with them, and I think part of it is because it is the insecurity.

Regardless of which route our students take, they are unlikely to want to reveal themselves to those they don't know. Our parents may worry that our students are missing out on opportunities they see as part of the high school experience.

Student/teacher relationship. Our parents' experience of the student/teacher relationship is a somewhat vicarious one. Our parents find out about it through watching its effect on our students, with the teacher an inevitable but invisible presence in any school work brought into the home space. Our students may also talk directly about a teacher, giving our parents another, somewhat filtered view. Less frequently, a triad experience occurs, as at parent-teacher conferences (if the student is present). Our parents can then see the exchange of body language between the two, as well as how they interact verbally. Our parents may come into direct contact with the teacher outside of our students' physical presence, but in a very real sense our students are still there, now the object of their interaction, as when a teacher calls or emails home about missing work.

Underachievement (by my working definition) is a school-based phenomenon, so the interaction of teacher and student is fundamental to the experience of underachievement, even for our parents.

Katie noticed that Bella's achievement level "depended on the teacher, it really did." Our parents know that when our students feel a kinship, a similarity of self, between themselves and their teacher, things in school are likely to go better (though in some cases "better" is still a relative term). In fact, on the whole, our parents have heard a lot of positive feedback from teachers about our students. Our students are seen as smart, they often participate and work well in class, and are quick to learn material. It is getting homework completed, work turned in, and studying for tests that seem to be consistent problems (though in some cases, our students have begun to struggle in class as well).

Our students also say good things about their teachers. Megan said, "She likes the teachers. She likes the programs." So, our parents see the relationships between our students and their teachers in a positive light. They don't blame the teachers for our students' underachievement, and they see the teacher as an ally for our students, particularly if the teacher seems to understand our students well.

Our parents' perception of the interaction of our students' selves and the overall school system is more of a mixed bag. They have frustrations with identification (both for GT and learning deficits). Our parents may have had to expend extra energy to push such identification through. Melody explained,

MI: We had one of the, actually, she lives next door, the teacher he had in second grade, or first grade. She right away said, "I think he needs an IEP, and you need

to write a letter, because it will take longer if I do it.” And so we did it, and they worked with him.

Our parents may have been dissatisfied with the identification process itself.

K: Bella has been able to read since she was three, just picked it up and ran with it. And so in first grade they did the phonetic testing, and it was somebody she didn't know. And so they would ask her what sound does this letter make, and she'd just look at them, so they thought she was a nonreader.

Our parents may have been dissatisfied with the gifted programming after their student was identified, or with how that programming ended.

M: She was pulled [identified for a pull-out class] for Gifted and Talented. ... It stopped, during elementary. ... I don't [know what happened to drop her from GT]. ... It happened, and then she was not involved anymore, and I think that really hurt her. It wasn't her choice not to be involved anymore.

Overall, the more individualized the relationship between student and teacher, the more satisfied our parents are. When relationships become impersonal, particularly navigating poorly communicated bureaucracy, when the parent and the student have little agency or understanding in their relationship with the school system, the experience is negative.

Student Experience of Sense of Self

The temporal self. Experience of time is mutable. We have multiple experiences of time. Our students speak about time moving slowly and time moving quickly. They talk about being completely unaware of time's passage. The differences in time passage seem to hinge on attention, whether it is continuous or fragmented, and where it is directed.

Bella told me, “[When I first get home], usually I think I relax for ten minutes, but it was actually like an hour or something. ... I have a lot of thoughts. ... It’s like about something that’s already happened it will kind of like play out in my head.” Thinking for Bella happens in movies and narration. These things are enough to consume her entire concentration and can lead to a loss of time sense.

For Abby, when she is in a class doing something she considers boring but important, controlling attention is a challenge.

A: When I’m bored it’s like super hard to pay attention. I’m like, *I have to pay attention!* But I’m focusing more on trying to pay attention than I actually am paying attention. ... And then I’m like, *Oh, it’s the end of class. What happened?*

The object of her attention has become the act of paying attention, rather than the content of the class. In her reverie, time races. She tends to daydream, too, until she is suddenly brought back into herself, her body sensing the world around her rather than the world within. “Sometimes it’s the bell ringing. Other times it’s like people moving around a lot like movement catches my attention a lot. Then I’m like, *Oh, yeah, I’m in class. Let’s try to pass.*”

This difficulty of controlling attention was a common experience. Otto said,

O: Usually I can get distracted and kind of drawn away from [a task] and [my parents] find that kind of aggravating, and usually I can still get something done. I will spend a little bit of time over here, and a little bit of time over here, and I multitask, even though my parents claim you can’t do that.

Otto believes (as his parents do) that, “everything has its proper time, and I agree with that, even though I don’t put it into practice.” But he finds himself unable to live up to

this ideal. “I think balance is the key to things,” Otto said. “Even though I can’t find that, I’d like to find it.” He just doesn’t know how.

Some of this may be tied to issues that have been well-studied amongst gifted students who don’t conform to expectations about learning, skill acquisition (including soft skills), and achievement—expectations that are based on what is considered “normal,” or “average.” Part of being gifted is to be on a differently timed journey through learning and development when compared to one’s peers (Heacox & Cash, 2014). This out-of-sync-ness affects how our students experience time in school. As Abby explained, “It’s the whole repetition of it all. Like saying the same thing five times in a row, and I’m like ‘I know it’s important, but do you really have to say it five times in a row?’” She perceives the repetition to be immediate and unnecessary, where her classmates may be wishing for the reminders just as they come. Rather than helpful, repetition in this case is a resented waste of time. For our students, this can precipitate lapses in attention, or behaviors that cause conflict.

Otto loves history, and may spend, in his words, “anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half reading stuff that’s not assigned” each night, most of it nonfiction, specifically history. So, in class, Otto feels that, “most of the time it was ‘I’ve already learned this.’ ... My teacher had problems with me taking notes.” Otto didn’t take notes because he didn’t need to in order to remember the material, which negatively impacted his grade on “the notebook checks, because I could list off the tactics, the generals, the major battles. ... The bulk of the content I already knew.” He just hadn’t demonstrated this mastery in the act of taking notes.

Our students are frustrated that classes are focused on bringing students up to a common standard, a standard which may feel below their current abilities, or below their interest level in terms of depth. Finn wished “it were more, like, individualized instead of just everyone being lumped together and expecting and held to the same standards as one another.” Our students don’t wish for school to be easier—they want it to be relevant and useful, and to acknowledge and respect their existing strengths and knowledge, and their ability to acquire material quickly. They may also wish that our system allowed them to tailor classes to their interests earlier in their school careers, so as not to waste their time.

The only student participant who felt that he consistently got value from the act of doing homework was George. He showed many of the factors researchers associate with underachievement (e.g., Deslisle & Galbraith, 2002; Dweck, 2000; Rimm, 2003; Siegle, 2013) but was actually able to achieve. All the other students perceive most homework as a waste of time, as do their parents.

B: I almost find homework annoying in a way. I usually learn most of the stuff in class. I don’t think I’ve ever really learned something from homework other than if it’s something new and it’s something that takes practice—then homework is less annoying.

At the study site, our students don’t have (or are unaware of) opportunities to prove mastery in order to skip homework that they don’t need for learning. This busywork impinges on their already limited time, including their time to pursue creative interests.

Bella told me, “I prefer doing tests and stuff like that over homework type things.” The purpose of homework is very different from the purpose of testing. Homework is generally to practice skills and deepen learning (except in a flipped

classroom—something I neither witnessed nor did the students mention); tests assess knowledge, understanding, and application (Heacox & Cash, 2014). Homework is a waste of time if our students don't need to practice skills and if the work is too superficial to deepen the student's understanding. Tests are a way for our students to demonstrate learning that has already taken place, and to then move on. The homework may not be serving its purpose for our students, while the tests are. Tests also generally take place at school, while homework generally takes place at home, a space our students consider their own. Tests tend to raise our students' grades (even if they never study) and completion points given for homework lower their grades.

Our students (and our parents) accept homework as a fact of school, even if they see it as busywork. Our parents don't contradict this (except for George, our near-miss), but rather admit that they also see homework as useless, but necessary for the grade. It is a game that students must play, and it is one that our students often choose to ignore. The grade is not motivation enough to get them to waste their time.

Twice exceptionality. Three of the student participants were diagnosed with ADHD (some with other learning disabilities as well) either before or during the course of this study. One other was diagnosed with depression. Rimm (2003) recommends checking underachieving students for learning disabilities and addressing these before looking at other interventions. In an ideal world, I would agree. However, some literature on giftedness (e.g., Lee, & Olenchak, 2015; Davis et al., 2011) suggests that ADHD is overdiagnosed in gifted students, creating additional problems instead of helping them. The pesky problem of masking effects, where gifts hide learning disabilities or vice versa

(Davis et al., 2011) can also make diagnosis of learning disabilities amongst the gifted a messy business.

That said, clearly some student participants had correct diagnoses of learning disabilities, and these affected their experience of self and time. While Abby—who does not have an ADHD diagnosis—loses her sense of time when she daydreams, disengaging with her senses and engaging with an inner world, until she is jolted back into herself by sound, sight, and movement, Steve loses time by becoming overly involved in his sensed world (Davis, et.al. 2011, 404), as we saw in one of his Chapter 4 anecdotes. Medication has been helpful for him, as have strategies employed by his teachers.

S: [Teachers] are really helpful for me because sometimes I get behind in class. They help me get caught up. ... Like [they] give me study guides that other people don't get. ... They know I'm smart, but I just don't express it that much.

The fact that Steve needs assistance to stay in time with his classmates doesn't make him doubt his sense that he is smart. However, the statement "I don't express it much" is stated actively. "Failing to express" his intelligence is not something that he feels happens *to* him due to his ADHD.

Changing and unchanging self. Abby states, "It's just a little bit difficult for me to. ... Like with due dates and stuff, and like, sitting down and working and having, like, just a schedule for work time. It's a little difficult for me to do that." Our students view themselves to *be* disorganized. It is an immovable part of their identity. Though they have been urged to change this behavior, even offered tools to change it, they may not believe it is something they can change.

Lack of organization also appears tied to low motivation for our students. They are usually able to stay organized when it comes to creative activities for which they feel high motivation, though they may still show some disorganization in this area, particularly if they do have ADHD. They may, for instance, have trouble keeping to only one sketchbook, having misplaced one and started another, several times over, before finding the first again. They regularly set aside time for creative activities and vary that time based on other obligations. Creative activities are not forgotten, neglected, or in other ways lost. When motivation is low, it is difficult for our students to remember to be organized. Bella, referring to math homework, a subject she dislikes, said, “If I forgot to write down what I was supposed to be doing, I’d be like, ‘So which problems am I doing now?’” She clarifies, “Usually the skill type homework I’m a little bit better at remembering than trivia ones, even though trivia type homework I usually can do quicker.” She finds skill-building homework to be useful for learning, whereas “trivia type homework” is useless repetition. Therefore, she remembers the skill-building homework and forgets the trivia type.

Attention helps to shape and is shaped by a sense of self (Hirstein, 2012), and attention is a limited resource, whose allocation is time sensitive and affects the perception of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Limits in both time and attention force prioritization of activities. Students perceive their own repeated patterns of time and attention allocation and identify with these patterns. *I am not organized. I am smart (or smarter than my peers). I don’t need to do homework or study to test well. I have trouble*

paying attention. These internal (and sometimes expressed) statements help our students define who they are. This sense of self is usually stated as universal and unchanging.

Higher-level thought involves constant precisely-timed shifts in attention, from perceptions, to semantic memory, to autobiographical memory, or from one task to another. This places attentional executive processes at the highest level in the cognitive hierarchy. It also shows how important they are for our sense of control over our own minds. People are considered responsible for what their (top down) attention is directed at, and we describe its actions using the word “I” (Hirstein, 2012, p. 53).

Despite this, students do see how they themselves have changed over time.

While our students feel that they have always underachieved, they are aware of changes in their underachieving behaviors as they have gotten older. Otto, talking about this change from elementary to middle school, says, “I stopped looking at things and saying, ‘Hey, that’s a bad idea; let’s do it anyways,’ to, ‘Hey, that’s a bad idea, what are the consequences?’” This awareness of consequences did not stop his underachievement, which switched to difficulties with procrastination and perfectionism (among other things). He is, however, aware that he has become less overtly trouble-seeking. Abby has also noticed a change.

A: At the beginning of freshman year I wouldn’t talk in any class at all. Now I can answer questions and stuff. So, the teacher is pushing me to answer questions and calling on me all the time helped me with social skills and all that stuff.

Our students can identify changes in their behavior and thinking but refer to personality traits as constants of who they are. They experience a tension between a feeling of self as a constant over time, and the feeling of self as changing over time.

Though our parents may feel our students are unaware of the future impact of their choices, our students are indeed aware that their underachievement is beginning to

have real world impact on the opportunities open to them later in life. While Bella is not yet looking at colleges, she found that her parents followed through on their threat (see Chapter 4), limiting her to one band class (instead of two) next year because she didn't get her grades up this year. Finn is extremely interested in learning, but she now believes that academia is a path for which she is completely unsuited and is looking at her art as a more viable career path. At one point, Otto wanted to be an astronaut and believed this to be a real possibility. He now thinks this is an opportunity he will never realize, due to his low grades.

The spatial self. While many of us have a sense of a constant core self, unchanging in time and space, part of our students' experience is that of a fractured, multifaceted, and context dependent self. Where they are causes changes in personality, priorities, and even memory. This is in-line with the philosophies of Heidegger, who proposed that the self is context-dependent, and that this changes the sense of appropriate behavior, and even the availability of objects (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015). This is also in-line with adolescent development patterns (Siegel, 2011). During adolescence, people try on different identities, adopt some and reject others, come to accept the multifaceted nature of the self, and, ideally, learn to get these different selves to cooperate. These selves correspond to different "states."

In brain terms, a state is composed of a cluster of neural firing patterns that embed within them certain behaviors, a feeling tone, and access to particular memories. ... All of these memories, skills, and even feelings ... are activated together (Siegel, 2011, pp. 198-199)

In a very real sense, who we are in context changes what skills we have and what we remember.

The number of spatial transitions students make in a school day is overwhelming, yet these are transitions we rarely think about. They may be one self in the private space of their bedroom when they first wake up, another self when eating breakfast, and another self when in the bus or car (or walking) on the way to school. Getting ready for class they may shift self many times, depending on where in the school they are, who surrounds them in those places, and what classes happen on that day. Four different selves (or more) may emerge for their four different classes, another for lunch, and more during passing periods. If the student participates in after school activities, more selves are needed, and even at home, the space changes depending on who is there, so there may be one self for home alone, another for home with sibling, and others for home with parent(s). Because of their age, these selves may not yet work together (Siegel, 2011).

Abby explains that she is either social or quiet in different spaces.

A: [It] totally depends on the class. ... So in classes that I have friends in I am a little more outgoing because I'm surrounded by people I know and at least somewhat like. ... Then in classes that I don't have friends in I'm really quiet and, 'Don't notice me!' kind of thing because people scare me.

Bella laments,

B: I struggle with remembering to do homework. ... Once I get home I forget about it, and I forget to check my planner and everything. I don't know. And when I'm at school I get my homework done a lot faster because I'll do it at lunch or something and it will get done in like ten minutes, but at home it takes me like half an hour to do it.

Our students seem to have compartmentalized their different selves, and this causes difficulty, particularly in the transition from school to home, because memory and skills available to the school self are inaccessible (or at least harder to access) for the home self.

Our students may feel a conflict among their values, strengths, who they see themselves to be, and the school space. It is difficult, sometimes, to be themselves at school. The school becomes a hostile place to the self. Otto said,

O: I find modern culture to be somewhat abrasive. Like a lot of the kids in our grade, I feel like they find it more attractive to be popular and athletic, and not on the smarter side of things, than to be balanced between both. And I find that, to be honest, it's a little bit offensive to me.

Some coping mechanisms that they have found to help with attention are not always welcome. Bella said, "At that school [the middle school she attended in another district] I wouldn't be allowed to doodle in my notebook or stuff like that unless it was like specifically for a diagram for my class."

I have already described how some aspects of the school architecture, furnishings, and lighting feel cold, hard, and off-putting. However, not all spaces at school are hostile. Some spaces also feel welcoming, safe, and accepting of our students. Bella said, "I feel most comfortable around the band room area just because I was there pretty much all summer, so I feel more comfortable there. ... I feel more comfortable in that building." Time previously spent in this space allows her to feel ownership and familiarity. Knowing who is likely to be in a space and feeling comfortable with those people, especially feeling that they have things in common, also make a place welcoming.

The study site is in a fairly affluent community, and our students have a room of their own at their primary residence. This room space is a refuge, where they can be alone to recharge and don't have to be someone else for anyone else. This is a space of creative activity, relaxation, and thought, of student control. Our students may also use their room as a place to disappear into digital space.

Digital space is important in our students' life. Steve feels more comfortable learning in digital space than in a conventional classroom, able to choose his own topics and pace. Steve explained, "I like to look up videos and teach myself." Otto plays video games. Finn regularly posts her artwork online and has begun a blog that had already accrued over 7000 followers shortly after she made it public. Though Finn feels that others perceive a bumbling, inaccurate version of herself, not her true self, when she meets them in person, in the digital space, she is better able to curate the self that others see. Like our students' room, the digital space may be a space of greater control and agency, despite the possibility of social media as a platform for bullying.

The room is a friendly refuge, but the rest of the house may not be. While our students may do homework in their room, along with many other activities, alone and trusted to use time and resources (such as computers) well, they may instead be expected to do their homework in a communal space, most commonly the kitchen table. Abby said, "Normally we do our homework at this table because they [parents] can supervise, I guess." For Abby, this is simply an accepted communal activity, with a parent there as a possible resource. Otto's experience is quite different. He is required to do his homework at the kitchen table so that (most often) his mother can monitor his activities, particularly

his use of his computer, and make sure that he is on task. This is a space of distrust, rebellion, and power struggle, not one of support, so this communal space in the house is a hostile one.

Our students also have an inner world. This space can be one of welcome refuge, or one of hostility. They regularly experience some form of daydreaming. Even if it is occasionally referred to as “being distracted,” this activity is a refuge when they are bored or frustrated in a classroom or home space that they feel unable to get away from in any other way. Abby described the experience this way: “You’re there and you’re coherent and everything, but it’s like you’re seeing it through someone else’s eyes. ... Like you’re there and you know you’re there, but you’re not actually there.”

While mind wandering may be considered off-task behavior in school, it is something that all humans do, and Smallwood and Schooler (2015) argue that it is actually a way for the brain to allocate its resources efficiently. They postulate that mind wandering serves some of the same functions as sleep, including placing experiences into meaningful context, as well as having other benefits, such as future planning, increasing the capacity to generate creative thoughts by providing incubation time, and fostering synthesis. Daydreaming tends to happen when the external demands on the brain don’t require the brain’s full attention, so these other benefits may outweigh the benefits of staying focused on the current task (Smallwood & Schooler, 2015). This may also explain our students’ need to multitask (origami bricks, listening to music while reading, shifting from task to task during homework). This may be a way our students have found of upping required attention for otherwise boring tasks.

If they are writers, our students inhabit their inner world while writing. Finn, in particular, feels that she spends a lot of time in her inner world, and that transitions to the outer world of others' expectation is jarring. She described it this way:

F: Everyone around me has a super-regimented way of doing things, like, when they are asked to do something they can just do it. And when I'm asked to do something ... OK, I'm going to need to like, re-write my brain for the day in order to be able to do this. I can't just change. ... It's as if my brain has tendrils coming out of it, and they're doing a thing, and I can't just rip them out and, like, start doing another thing. I just can't just switch like that super easily. It takes some time to prepare my brain, like feeling in my body to be able to just sit and work and do bookwork.

For this reason, the fast transitions within the school day are difficult for our students. In order to transition from one activity to another (generally from one they have chosen that takes place largely in their inner world) to one that has been imposed upon her, she has to, as Finn describes it, "shift my attention from over here in this world [her internal world] to, like, the real world." This shift is jarring and time consuming, and they feel that others are able to make this shift much more easily than they do.

The corporeal self. Hirstein (2012) maintains that the executive processes in the brain evaluate representations that the rest of the brain presents for such evaluation. These representations are tied to brain systems which monitor the body (Damasio, 1999). In this way, perception of the self is corporeal.

Our students view the constants of their various selves in several ways. When reflecting on these personality traits, they use language that implies they see these aspects of self as unwavering, though (as discussed in the motivation section) they may feel that

they should be able to will themselves to be different, to change at least some of these aspects of self. These are the seemingly fixed traits that our students see in themselves:

I am creative. Our students express real joy about chosen creative endeavors. Eyes light, speech patterns change, increasing in speed, answer length, and ease of language. Abby says that her favorite class is “creative writing. It’s the best class ever. ... It’s just like a lot of writing and using the creative side of your brain instead of math equations.” When asked to “tell me about yourself,” Bella replied, “I play trumpet.” This activity, playing trumpet (and also euphonium) is central to who Bella considers herself to be as a person. She continued, “It’s something that I feel like I’m pretty good at and that’s part of what makes it more fun.” She feels competent at this creative task.

Though others sometimes do not share our students’ interests, or our students think they see these activities as odd, our students persist in their creative activities. They may receive awards or minor jobs related to their creative activities as well. Creativity is experienced as energizing, recharging, and affirming, feelings which are all linked to high motivation and learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

I am smart. Our students often learn faster or more in depth than their peers, and often feel held back or boxed in by class structure and the school system. When left to their own devices, they are perfectly able to rally resources (books, educational TV, on-line tutorials) to teach themselves at the pace and level that they prefer. As Finn stated, “I really like to learn.” Intelligence is experienced as a given. Our students feel pride in their intelligence, but also experience it as a source of isolation and social difference.

I am noncompliant. Finn said, “I’m, like, a really independent person, and I always have been. So, I don’t really like being told what to do. Even if its beneficial for me. I’m just rebellious by nature.” While Finn stated this most boldly, this emerges from most of the student interviews. Abby talks about only doing the work that she wants to do. Bella talks about how the school doesn’t have the right to impinge on her time. Also, many of the students hedge the truth, hide their true actions and time use, or outright lie to authority. Noncompliance, like intelligence, can be a source of pride and strength, but also a source of guilt.

I am disorganized. Both Abby and Bella stated, word for word, “I’m a really forgetful person.” Our students have problems with organization and consider themselves disorganized, and sometimes also messy. Our students usually consider this a fact of life, and one that doesn’t really bother them in the moment of the interview. But they also sometimes experiences disorganization as a feeling of helplessness and being overwhelmed, a feeling of inexplicable lack, and a sense of “what is wrong with me?” This comes across when our students reflect on specific incidents when disorganization has led to lower grades.

I am sensitive. Our students know that they notice things that others don’t. This can be an advantage in helping them be creative, but it has a downside. They feel this sensitivity makes them more distractible than their peers, and also that they just shouldn’t let things get to them the way they do.

I am a procrastinator. Our students procrastinate in many different ways. Our students tell themselves that they will do work later, both knowing and hiding from

themselves the fact that they have no real no intention of doing certain assignments. Or, they may intend to do the work, but have difficulty starting, keeping with, completing, or submitting the work. They may find the work unchallenging, and find it easier to get motivated to work if they delay until the deadline looms and they can experience a “rush,” as Otto put it, from having so little time, though this self-handicapping eventually leads to lower self-confidence and agency and becomes less effective at protecting our students’ self-esteem over time (De Castella et al., 2013). Procrastination also provides an excuse to get out from under unreasonable self-set expectations (another form of self-handicapping). It can even be a way to prove how much smarter than others our students are. If they can get the same or a higher grade than classmates with less work or time spent, it proves they are smart and capable. The fact that they need this proof shows that their belief in their abilities is actually quite fragile (Dweck, 2000). Our students believe procrastination is a choice, but also seem unable to change the behavior if they want to. Because they feel that they should be able to control this behavior but can’t, our students experience procrastination as guilt and helplessness. Combined with noncompliance, procrastination may also feel powerful, a way to exercise control.

I am a perfectionist. Our students may consider themselves perfectionists, though it comes in different degrees. It causes anxiety during group work. Bella said, “I’ll get a little bit perfectionistic in a way, especially if it’s like a project or something where we’re drawing something or building something.” Bella is aware of her strengths, but also of the fact that she may have different standards than others. She worries that her perfectionism will alienate others. She also experiences anxiety if she is not allowed to do

the part of group projects that land in her strength areas. This anxiety is two-fold. First, she is anxious because she believes she is likely to do the best job out of all the members of her group at these activities. Watching others do it poorly, or in a way different from how she would, feels “creepy-crawly” on her skin and like a “clenching in my stomach.” Second, she is anxious because she may have to do work in an area that is a weakness and others will see.

Perfectionism seems particularly destructive when our students are engaged in activities they feel invested in. They feel pressure to have the right idea and to execute it perfectly from beginning to end. This may cause them to restart often, rework beginnings of projects, and to abandon projects if they are not perfect.

F: I feel like I have to be a certain way. Like not for anybody else, but I have sort of like really high standards for myself, and I just felt constantly disappointed in myself. ... I just am constantly disappointed in myself and feeling like I'm not good enough, I'm not doing enough.

Perfectionism is experienced as anxiety, self-doubt, and shame.

The self and relationships.

Introversion. Our students consider themselves to be introverted. As Bella put it, “When I talk to people too much I just kind of feel kind of worn out mentally.” School is by its nature a social setting, and I have noticed it becoming more so as emphasis on group work and learning to collaborate increases (Robinson, 2003). Our students see the interaction of their introversion and the social aspects of school as both positive and negative. Bella said, “I like that school kind of lets me meet people, but at the same time I have another excuse to not talk to people, like, ‘Oh, yeah, I’m doing my homework.’”

Our students may not have contact with friends at all outside of school or school-related activities. Having to be social at school is exhausting, but it ensures our students have a chance, excuse, and context in which to build important social connections.

Our students may have a core group of friends (usually no larger than four including the study participant) with whom they hang out on a regular basis and feel close to. Abby describes a typical lunch:

A: During school at lunch we rant about things we're passionate about. ... Most times I'll start off like, 'Oh, I got this new song,' and all that stuff, and they'll be like, 'Oh, what is it?' and start asking me questions. And I'll just go on this tangent about what it is and how excited I am to play it.

Even though not all her friends are musicians, they really listen. They are engaged. Abby explains, "Engaged is like they're with you and kind of happy for you because you're happy and sad for you because you're sad, and just going on with you." Interactions with friends help our students feel like themselves, relaxed and with no fractures in the self.

On the other hand, our students may not have such a good peer support system. Otto talked about having a group of friends that "when I'm with them, I can be a pretty lively and social person," but they aren't really interested in the things he is interested in. By the end of the year, they had made some choices about substance use that he didn't respect, and he ended the friendships, leaving himself completely isolated. At the beginning of the year, Finn did not feel she could share her passions with her friends. She talked about those she hung out with from her cello section, "Usually they're in a higher chair or something than I am, so I don't really feel comfortable talking to them about my music because they are better." She also felt that she should be making more friends. But

by the end of the year, she came to believe that her core group of three real friends was enough and was keenly aware of the difference between a real friend and people she just associated with, especially those online.

Our students may feel invisible to others to some extent. Bella explained, “I feel like I’m just not like a person that people really notice immediately because I am quiet, and I do kind of like sit in a corner pretty much, metaphorically.” This invisibility also manifests in the disconnect between who our students feel they are and who others see them to be. Finn said,

F: I feel like the version of myself that I put out is always sort of fumbling and stumbling, and doing things wrong, and ... I don’t really think that’s who I am in my core, but I don’t know really how to get myself out. So, the version of myself that people see is usually pretty warped, I think.

She finds that she wants both to be noticed and to disappear. She dyed her hair, and that was unusual for the study site. It made her stand out and got attention. She feels that it made a difference in her social life, as she was immediately perceived as cool, whereas in her previous school experience she had been teased and bullied. But she is extremely quiet in classes and doesn’t want friends to see her creative endeavors. Our students may deliberately hide (sitting in the back of the classroom, avoiding eye contact, etc.) or this invisibility may seem to be a byproduct of who they are.

Self and teachers. Our students may make strong connections with their teachers. Abby says that she connected with teachers who had “similar interests. I had Mrs. Peterson for poetry studies, and so we’re similar in the way that we like writing and exploring new things and everything.” Both Abby and her poetry teacher liked novelty.

This implies that, like Abby, Mrs. Peterson demonstrated creative traits (Davis et al., 2005). For Finn, however, being able to connect with teachers is something she doesn't feel capable of, and so seeing others do so makes her aware of her isolation and feelings of inadequacy. "I see a lot of students that are pretty good friends with all of their teachers, and I feel like I could never really rise to that level." Our students' perception of their relationships with their teachers is influenced by negative self-talk. As Finn said,

F: I always get the idea that my teachers don't really like me. But when I go to parent-teacher conferences, they're always like really happy to talk about me and it seems like they *do* like me, and that makes me feel pretty good. But then after a while, that sort of wears off, and I feel like they don't like me.

The psychological self is a "blend of what we imagine important people in our lives think of us" (Berk, 2012, p. 459). When perception of what others think of us is inaccurate, distorted by negative self-talk, it undermines a healthy sense of self.

Self and parents. Our students' relationship with their parent(s) and how it affects their sense of self is extremely complicated, and has strong ties to issues of power, so many of the issues first put forth here I will address again and from a slightly different point of view in the next chapter. Student relationships with parents in this study range widely and have both positive and negative effects on student sense of self.

Parents help shape their children's sense of self, acting as a mirror to help children see themselves in the world, helping them to make judgements about what to incorporate and what to discard in terms of behavior and values (Cross, 2011). But this shaping is interactional. The adolescent's job at this stage in their development (according to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development) is to resolve the crisis

between identity and role confusion (Cross, 2011). They must try on various roles to find a good fit, until they are able to integrate who they thought they were as a child, and who they see their future self to be (Cross, 2011). They must get their multiple selves to work together (Siegle, 2011). The relationship of our parents to our students has a huge impact on the possible identities our students see and consider possible, parent opinions sometimes serving as a support to help our students overcome obstacles, other times functioning as obstacles themselves.

At the beginning of the study, Finn said of her mom, “I don’t think she’s too keen on the idea of me being an actual paid artist because she, herself, is an academic and sort of wants me to go down that path.” Finn tried to force herself to fit this perceived ideal self, but it was a bad fit. At the end of the year when she decided that art was a valid career path, she told me that a large chunk of what she said in her first interview (about wanting to be at school because she wanted to learn and school was the place to do that) was not true. “I said all of those things because I was super nervous for the school year and I was trying to have a mantra going. ... I was like, ‘I need to think this way.’ But I sort of lost that as the year went on because I can’t suppress who I actually am.”

While our parents may offer support for creative endeavors, this type of support is by no means certain. Our students may instead feel like our parents use the student’s love of creative endeavors as a lever, denying our students time or access to creative activities until schoolwork is done or grades improve. I will discuss this further in the power section. The use of this lever ranges from the seemingly petty and obstructionist—Otto’s parents, despite their comfortable socioeconomic position, denied him use of the printer

for hard copies of images to use as visual references for drawings because they viewed it as a waste of printer ink—to the long term—Bella’s parents dropped her from one of her band classes next year due to poor grades. The overall impact to the student self of this denial of creative activity varies greatly in duration and magnitude, but no matter its severity, it communicates that this creative act, held so close to our students’ identity, is valued less than activities imposed by the outside world—activities that parents sometimes openly refer to as hoop-jumping. Therefore, sometimes at least, creative endeavors are not considered serious or valuable. “They see everything has its proper time, and I agree with that, even though I don’t put it into practice,” Otto says, adopting the ideals of behavior his parents model, without being able to implement them. “They’re OK with it when I’m [drawing], when I don’t have something else to be doing. But when I have homework to be done and I’m doing one of my other things I like to do, they will get on me.” Edward and Teri’s actions have communicated that Otto’s obligations to others supersede his obligations to fulfill his own need (even if this was not their intent). This type of demanded selflessness can make our students feel like they have no room for themselves. They feel their freedom is restricted, their true self compressed, and so they try to find ways that allow them to breathe.

Our students consider themselves to be smart or extremely smart. They seem to expend a fair amount of energy convincing themselves (and me) that this is true, despite what grades conveyed. When asked how they were doing in school, some said, “Fine,” “Good,” or some version of “Not as well as I should be.” This was usually said with some tension-relieving laughter. When I asked how their parent’s thought they were

doing, most conceded that their parents thought they could or should be doing better than they were, and that their parents were annoyed, angry, or frustrated about this. Bella simply didn't know what her parents thought. But the most telling response was from Steve. When I asked him what his parents thought about how he was doing in school, his face became still, and he simply stared silently over my right shoulder for a long time. Finally, I reminded him that he had the right to skip a question if he didn't want to answer. He replied, "Yes, skip it." It seemed to me that he knew that his parents were upset with his level of achievement in school. Until that point in the interview, he had painted a rosy picture of his school achievement. He couldn't seem to reconcile the two contradictory views at that moment. His body language related passive resistance and a message that "you don't know me."

Discussion

Perceived student personality traits affect our students' ability to function in school and in the world. Freund and Holling (2008) found that some teachers don't cope well with creative students' needs for independence, autonomy, and nonconformity. Our teachers find some difficulty in dealing with students who don't follow directions or comply with rules, norms and expectations, but they are generally philosophically inclined to value and promote creativity, when other constraints allow. Our teachers would like to provide opportunities for risk-taking and complexity but find that these ideals come into conflict with curricular requirements and time constraints. Our parents find difficulty in dealing with our students' disorganization and tendency to follow their own priorities rather than those which will promote school achievement, particularly

considering the difficulty balancing time demands of creative activities and school work. Our parents are aware of our students' tendency toward strong emotions and feel protective when our students take the emotional risk of putting creative work out into the world.

Our students clearly show many of the positive traits associated with creative people. Our students are creative, independent, artistic, curious, and need time alone (Davis, 2003). They also have high intelligence and aesthetic sensitivity (Feldman, 1999). Student participant sense of humor was apparent in the ways that they talked (Abby laughed continually throughout her interview). Attraction to complexity and open-mindedness showed in each individual's variety of interests, as well as in their ability to see situations from multiple viewpoints (Davis, 2003).

Most creative studies based on the study of eminent people (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Shekerjian, 1990) mention both motivation and high levels of focus on a domain and its adjacent domains. I discussed motivation in detail in the last chapter, and it is clear that motivation is divided: our students are generally highly motivated to engage in their chosen creative tasks, and unmotivated to do other tasks which authority figures in their lives may deem more important. It also seems that this intrinsic motivation to create may eventually be eroded as our students' self-esteem drops and support for creative activities dissolves. Only one student in the study showed extreme focus on a specific domain: George, our near-miss for underachievement. The others all had extremely wide-ranging interests and were not domain-specific in their creative endeavors. I am left questioning if this fractured focus contributes to underachievement (not selective

consumerism; Deslisle & Galbraith, 2002), if it is a byproduct of it, or if the interaction of these factors is more complex.

Our students demonstrate many personality traits common to creative people that are often perceived as negative. They are emotional, questioning of authority, arrogant or egocentric, absentminded and disorderly, and argumentative (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Davis, 2003).

Our students also display many traits associated with underachievement. They have low self-esteem (Siegle, 2013; Rimm, 2003), low self-motivation (Siegle, 2013) in academic tasks, and maladaptive perfectionism (Rimm, 2003). They also show signs of learned helplessness, a low sense of control over their life, and possibly low metacognitive skills (Dweck, 2000; Rimm, 2003) as shown by their belief that they have the tools to change their behavior, but at the same time seem unable to do so.

Some of these traits they perceive themselves, others reflect how important others in their life perceive them. Some of these traits are seen as inherent, and others as behaviors that may be subject to change over time.

Student sense of self and teacher and parent senses of student self display a good deal of overlap. I have presented the traits that study participants discussed directly as inherent to the student in Figure 1.

Overlap of Perceived Student Personality Traits

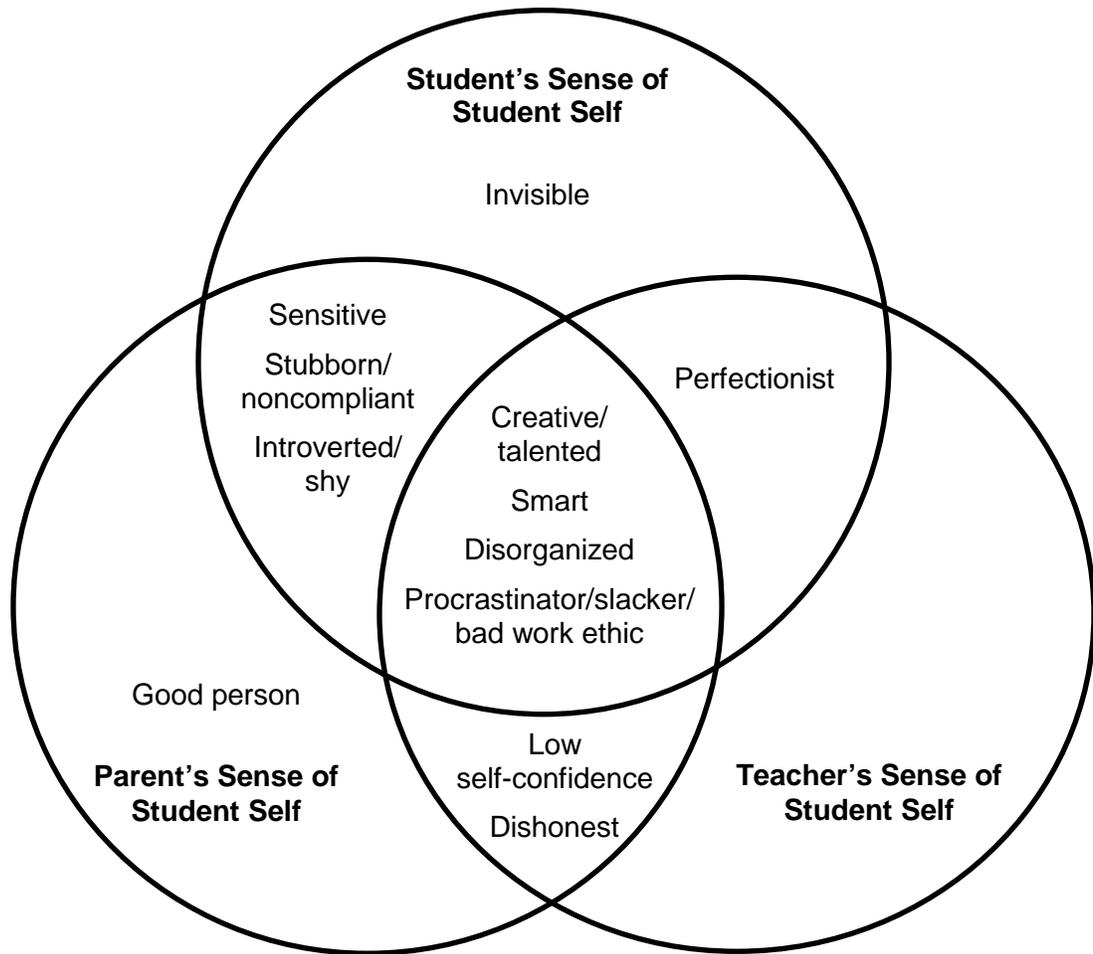


Figure 1. Perceived personality traits.

Though a few traits do not completely overlap, overall, the different participants agree about who our students are in themselves. The traits are a mix of creative personality and underachievement traits. Yet our parents and our teachers both articulate confusion about why our students behave the way they do. Even our students share some

of this confusion. With such a clear and consistent understanding of who the student is, is this all? Is the student simply a disorganized, stubborn slacker, with nothing to be done? Also, many of the personality traits attributed to our students (notably, the ones associated with underachievement) seem to be ones that should inhibit creativity, not enhance it. Something is missing from the picture.

Existential possibilities. Our students experience their sense of self as both fixed and changeable. Various ideas about what the self is and how it is perceived attempt to explain this dual experience (e.g., Damasio, 1999; Hirstein, 2012), and philosophers have wrestled with this issue for centuries (Kaufer & Chemaro, 2015). Throughout this chapter I have discussed several theories through which the self is studied and some of the implications of these experiences of self to achievement and underachievement in school. I will now address the phenomenological (specifically Heidegger's) understanding of self and show how it ties participant experiences and these other theories together.

Heidegger brings several important foundational ideas to the understanding of the sense of self. The first, mentioned in Chapter 3, is that there are two ways of engaging things in the world: ready-to-hand (equipment to be used) and present-at-hand (objects separated from their use and "gawked at" to sense their abstract qualities; van Manen, 2014). These are sometimes translated as "availability" and "occurrence" (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015). Unlike his predecessors, Heidegger maintained that we encounter equipment first as available, using objects toward some purpose (like riding a bike) and only second as abstract, quantifiable qualities, often when the use of the object fails to work, or an object is so outside previous experience as to be unfathomably useless

(Kaufer & Chemero, 2015). For example, I have no real idea how a crank shaft fits into a car and helps the engine power its motion, but my husband got me one to draw because I thought it has an interesting look—yet even here, my encounter with this unfamiliar object is ready-to-hand, as I apply my existing skills as an artist, rather than my nonexistent skills as an engineer or mechanic. It is likely that I would not remember what a crank shaft is at all if it had not been available to me in some sense. After all, I have heard many car parts mentioned that do not stay in my head.

I see an interesting parallel between availability and the hot system in the brain, which connects an object (a marshmallow or whatever other objects or situations it encounters) to immediate use (“It will taste so good!”) and occurrence and the cool system of the brain, which is more likely to activate if the test subject focusses instead on its abstract qualities (its roundness, its whiteness), or makes it unavailable by picturing the actual object as a photograph of the object, no longer available for use (as in, “I can’t eat it now, it’s a picture”; Mischel, 2014). While the equation of these neurological systems and the concepts of availability and occurrence are not a perfect match, the connection lends weight to the argument that we process availability experiences first and faster than occurrence experiences.

The second of Heidegger’s foundational ideas that ties into the sense of self is the idea of existential possibilities. According to Kaufer and Chemero (2015), Heidegger doesn’t support the idea of a unified and unchanging self. Instead, he maintains that the self is context-dependent. One’s skills (competencies) and the “the anyone,” a “vague, elusive mass of everyone, yet nobody in particular, which holds sway over the norms that

govern the meaningfulness of the world” (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 65), limit and dictate what one considers to be possible ways of being in the world. These ways of being in the world are existential possibilities. They organize the purposeful ways we encounter equipment into meaningful wholes (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015). This idea is similar to Siegel’s (2011) states of mind. People have multiple existential possibilities (teacher, wife, sister, artist), and multiple existential possibilities occur in the same context (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015).

All these concepts interweave. I will give a short anecdote to demonstrate. This fall I moved into a classroom that was recently renovated. Small changes are still being made to the classroom, and I have noticed some issues with the functionality of the new renovations. These issues bring me closer to an occurrent experience of these parts of the classroom because the equipment ceases to be completely available. I don’t notice the occurrence of the sink, I just use it, because it works just fine. I have, however, noticed there is a gap in the wall, letting too much sound through from the adjacent classroom, which makes it hard for my students to concentrate. In some sense, the wall is no longer available as a wall because it has ceased to function as one. I have noticed that the splashboard of the counter is not flush with the wall, and students have lost papers into this gap. Until this happened, I didn’t realize that the splashboard was supposed to be attached to the wall. Before these problems, I did not notice that my previous classroom did not have these gaps—the lack of gaps was part of the functionality and availability of the room.

Eventually, a representative from the construction company came to inspect the renovations. I told him about the problems I had noticed, and he found some others. The cabinets were missing magnets that were supposed to help them stay shut. I thought, *Oh, that would be great!* The lack of these magnets directly affected the availability of the room for my existential possibility as a teacher, so I remember it vividly, though I hadn't noticed their absence before. However, I also remember that the inspector pointed out some problem in the ceiling. From an engineer's point of view, this problem was significant. It did not impact my use of the room at all—*so I don't even remember what the problem was.* The ceiling problem was not part of my sense of availability of the room because it was not part of my existential possibility as a teacher.

Existential possibilities directly shape attention, experience, and memory. Though they are mutable and context dependent, who a person is, and the possibilities he or she perceives for him- or herself in a context shape what he or she can do (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015). A student may perform the social role of attending class, facing the teacher, having at least some class supplies, but if being a *successful* student is not an existential possibility for him or her in that space, he or she will feel disconnected, and equipment, from content information to due dates, will be present but unavailable, and so, useless (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015). If being a student, to him or her, means being there to learn, not being there to earn points, only the equipment that promotes learning (not achievement or hoop-jumping) will be available to him or her, as we saw with Bella and her various types of homework.

Disconnect from availability worsens in the face of anxiety. In the face of anxiety, “we fail to be drawn into the world,” (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015, p. 74). All the equipment around us loses significance and meaning, but not presence, and the presence without meaning makes us feel isolated and strange, with no existential possibilities, with nothing, with no self (Kaufer & Chemero, 2015). If our students experience school as a place of anxiety, with no possible self in that place, no way exists, then, for them to *be* a student. No organizational system in the world can possibly help our students remember the demands from such inaccessible equipment. Our students have no access to achievement, and no idea why their experience of school is so different from the experiences of those around them. They believe that the problem is one of character or willpower, that something may be inherently wrong with them. Teachers and parents may believe the same thing.

To change the experience of underachievement, *being a student* must become an existential possibility. The self is mutable, but not infinitely so (Hudson & Fraley, 2015). We must find ways to make being a student a possibility for creative adolescents in the classroom. I will present some possible steps toward this goal in Chapter 9.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE LENS OF POWER

Throughout my exploration of social power, I kept remembering H.C. Andersen's story of the Emperor's New Clothes (Andersen, 1949/2017). The Emperor is an unfit monarch who spends all his time and money on clothes instead of responsible rule, though he believes he does his job well. He also believes that others think he does his job well. Two swindlers come to town claiming to be weavers with the ability to weave cloth so fine that it becomes invisible to those who are unfit for their positions, or who are unusually stupid. The emperor decides he wants these clothes to tell who of his ministers is unfit for his post, and who in his populace is wise or a fool. He has decided to suspend his own judgment in favor of an outside authority (the cloth). The emperor has given the cloth (and the swindlers) power. Two ministers check on the progress of the weaving, cannot see the cloth, and choose to protect their positions by claiming to see it. They choose compliance over their own perception, fearing the consequences if they reveal what they have (not) seen. The emperor has the same reaction when he fails to see the cloth. He dresses in his new clothes and prepares for his procession, the two ministers holding his invisible train. All who view the procession also claim to see what they can't until a little child cries out that the emperor "hasn't got anything on!" (Andersen, 1949/2017).

The child in the story feels no pressure to comply with the fiction. He does not fear to be seen as unfit for his post—he has no post. Neither does he fear to be seen as

unusually stupid. He is a child, not expected to be wise. The truth of his perception and his belief in its truth removes any obligation to comply with an authority that he may be unaware of. Eventually his truth spreads through the onlookers (peasants all). But the emperor, who now fears he knows the truth as well, decides that the procession must go on, and his nobles follow his lead.

The number of inferences and political commentary to be drawn from this story are numerous, but the most important one for my purpose here is to note that power is a social construct. “Interpersonal perceptions and the accuracy of those perceptions should be considered within interpersonal power dynamics because until, or unless, someone attempts to exercise power, power (or the lack thereof) resides only in people’s minds” (Turner & Schabram, 2012, p. 9). Power, then, is a formless perception, until it works.

The Teacher and Power

Power and time. Our teachers would like to effect change toward better learning for students (as opposed to “achievement,” a measure which may or may not tie to learning). They would also like to effect change toward student happiness, autonomy, and ability to function to take care of him- or herself at the end of formal education (be that high school or some further level of formal training). Power systems and individual power shore up or undermine our teachers’ ability to move toward these goals.

Components within the system compete for teacher time and attention. The school system is embedded within the larger culture, and as the culture shifts, so does its influence on school systems and teacher time use (Baker, 2009). The hierarchy of power is not always visible or deliberately constructed. Parents, colleges, employers, and

politicians all have influence on what teachers do, through varied mechanisms: committees, admission policies/expectations, the press, all of these are used to influence how school systems, schools, and teachers prioritize the use of time (Baker, 2009; Gallagher, 2004; Klein, 2015; Popkewitz, 2011).

State-imposed requirements influence the use of teacher time and therefore where teacher influence is directed (Beisser, 2008; Gallagher, 2004; Klein, 2015). Core subject teachers, especially, must make sure to cover curricula specified in state standards and assessed on state achievement tests. Our teachers may find themselves choosing to convey information in less depth, with more direction and less exploration than they would like due to these requirements. Talking about content depth and encouraging creativity and risk-taking, a soft skill he believes we don't teach well, Cody Slade said,

CS: How do you fit that into the system, I mean, how do you have time? You can't plan it. You can't plan risk-taking, but you've got to create a system where it happens, because it is an organic thing, risk-taking is, and so how do you have time to create a system where that happens? That's a lot of work, and it is a lot of time. If we had three preps and 20 students each, I think people that are good teachers and work hard at it would do it more. I don't need more pay, I just need more time, in my opinion.

Despite the large class sizes, our teachers do their best to individualize instruction and continually improve their practice. However, they wish that the state, district office, and administrators placed more faith in their professionalism. Activities such as standardized testing and submitting proof of regularly conducted data dialogs feel like a waste of time and an expression of distrust on the part of higher authorities. Nadia Hook said,

NH: I want administration to trust teachers ... that teachers are working with their students, they know their students. They have that connection with them. Trust the teachers that they know what to do. ... We do data dialogue all the time. It's just not having to go through all the hoops to do it.

Our teachers do not resent the work of maintaining professional practices but the necessity of proving that they have done so, and the implication that without this required documentation such professional practices might or would not take place. Our teachers would prefer that competence was assumed unless evidence was found that a teacher needed further support and monitoring.

Grading homework is a mirror of the teacher's experience of being evaluated, but at a lower power level. Samantha Johnson started her teaching career at a different site, where homework completion was part of a soft skills grade, but not part of a standards-based achievement grade.

SJ: I was able to say, "Johnnie here is having a proficient understanding of this material. I am concerned that it won't last due to his soft skill grade," whatever. I tried that my first year at the middle school here and got told multiple times by parents that my practice [homework] was being put to the wayside because English was getting graded, and Social Studies was getting graded, and all these other classes were getting a grade, and so they would get to the Math when they got all their graded stuff in, so I was getting trumped, sadly, by the fact that they were getting points for this, and not for mine, and so I think until we have a collective understanding or a collective buy in to that, that's ...

Students may choose to prioritize that which is evaluated, rather than that which is most necessary for their own learning or growth. Our teachers feel they do not have the power to make the change they would like to make alone. Rather, such a change would have to be a collective decision, implemented throughout the school. Teachers across departments would need to have time to engage in dialog to implement such a change.

Though both our teachers and our students wish for more autonomy, accountability is also important. Organizational systems, when designed well and functioning well, help capitalize on the experience of many to guide decisions about priorities that will support success (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Therefore, seeing the results of procedures and reviewing whether they are working effectively toward the organization's success is crucial. Our teachers feel that this is an area where the study site's systems are lacking.

CS: We kind of get distracted. I heard it said the other day really well. We want in the United States specifically, we want it to work. If we try something, we want it to work and work well, and if we try it for a while and it's not doing as much as we think it should be doing, we get rid of it. So, like the War on Poverty. It was promised that it was going to end, it was going to end all kinds of social problems. It didn't, but it did some good things, but we pretty much scrapped all of it.

The current public education system in the United States usually organizes and evaluates students based on grade level, which loosely depends on age (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). On the surface this makes sense, as human brain development follows a roughly predictable chronological progression (Berk, 2012). Students are organized by grade and are expected to meet certain benchmarks at certain grade levels (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). But a single class can have a huge range of grade levels of understanding and learning rates (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011), and gifted students often learn and progress through developmental stages faster than their age peers (Cohen & Kim, 1999; Heacox & Cash, 2014). Working in this environment, our teachers must attempt to individualize for students, but this takes time and training. Time is also limited by the end of senior year and graduation (or not) looming. Samantha stated, "I think we

have to be a little more open-minded about what our objective is and what the time line is to get to that.”

Power and space. High school is a place of preparation. A high school diploma signifies completion of this preparation and supposed readiness for adult challenges, including work, apprenticeships, and/or college. High school is also a place of shelter, where teachers, counselors, and administrators still protect students as much as they can while preparing them for their futures. This preparation is part of the protection they attempt to give, helping students take over responsibility for protecting themselves.

As previously discussed, our teachers have a great deal of control over their classroom, within the limits of existing architecture, available furniture, and available budget. They manipulate the physical space, decorating the room to communicate who they are to the students, to set expectations, to make resources (including reminders about goals and norms) easily available, and to facilitate teaching and learning activities. They may have a regular seating chart that they use to group students in various ways, including ability groupings, heterogeneous groupings, and also to separate students who distract each other. They may have students rearrange desks into special configurations for various activities, moving desks together for collaboration and apart for test taking, for instance. Different areas of the room may be specialized, like the lab space in the back half of a science class. The teacher decides (within a limiting framework of floorspace and budget) how to use the space.

Grouping of students happens within the classroom, but also on a larger scale in terms of what classes students take. These choices are not completely unconstrained for

the student but may be shaped by prerequisites; teacher, parent, and counselor decisions; graduation requirements; and other factors. The classes students take dictate the spaces in which they learn, which teachers they may come in contact with, and who their classmates will be. All of this changes the experience of power and space, for both students and teachers.

Leveled classes. Our teachers have experienced a change in what a high school diploma means since they were in school.

RS: When I went to high school...you just graduated high school. There was not [any] of this diplomas, different diplomas. There was none of that game. You went to high school and everybody just graduated high school. ... I just feel like ... we're trying to be college. When you've got sophomores—I didn't know what a college was when I was a sophomore! They're already planning out all this stuff, and it seems like a lot of stress for not the reward they think is on the other end.

They remember a time (or have read about a time) when a high school diploma was enough to ensure employability for middle class jobs, not just waiting tables. Now, they feel a cultural push for continuation into and through college, and different types of diploma's indicative of achievement, status, and future potential.

This change in purpose of place has our teachers divided. They may strongly favor having different levels for different classes, allowing students time to move at their own varied paces and focus their energy and time on personal interest and strength areas. However, our teachers may feel that offering different levels of classes is a bad thing, instead placing too much stress on students to compete and achieve beyond reasonable expectation, taking away some aspect of fading childhood. They may even feel both simultaneously. If they do object to higher level classes, they may feel that taking high-

level students out of regular classes deprives other students of peer examples and opportunities to experience material more deeply in class discussions or collaborations.

Cody remembered that before AP was offered,

CS: I had students that went on to some very prestigious colleges. Without saying specifically, I would have the top student in the class. Now, I don't have the top 30 in the class, in the junior class in US history, because they choose [AP], they have to because the system is set up so if they don't do it, they are not going to get into the school they want to or compete for the scholarships that they want to.

Our teachers have limited power to change the leveled class structure. They believe that this is the new cultural norm, and that the community expects and demands these leveled offerings; at least, they believe that *vocal* parents advocate for these classes for their children, and that advocates for the idea that lower achieving students would benefit from mixed level classes may not exist. They have not seen or may not believe the research that shows both low-performing and high-performing students benefit from homogenous grouping. (e.g., Collins & Gan, 2013; Ding & Lehrer, 2007).

Our teachers feel that students in higher-level classes are there because they want to be. Those in normal and low-level classes are there because they have to be. They may feel that this greater desire on the part of students to be there and to learn makes advanced classes easier and more rewarding to teach. However, they may have noticed an increased propensity for perfectionism, concern over points instead of learning, and even cheating in these higher-level classes.

Our teachers generally believe that higher levels of motivation occur in higher-level classes. The students are more motivated to achieve in school or to learn in general, and so take high-level classes. No teacher participants expressed that raising the level of a

class or the level of challenge within a class as a way to motivate an unmotivated student, despite evidence that low challenge level fosters underachievement (Rimm, 2003).

Differences between different subjects.

FB: What I find is that the students that are not achieving well elsewhere thrive in the environment that I have. All of a sudden, they find that they can do stuff, and it's good, and they have freedom to do stuff, and it's okay. I always get the biggest kick. I read a kid's, sometimes it's IEP kids, and I'll read their little synopsis, and it will say "needs a structured environment." And I'm like, okay, you put them in here, there's really, I mean, there's structure, but it's like really random, but yet they do okay. I've never had one of those needing structures totally freak out in my crazy realm that we're in. But I think just because there is a little less structure and they're not being hounded on all the time, do it this way, do it this way, do it this way, there's a little more flexibility and they seem to like that.

Our teachers, if they teach elective classes, may feel that their subjects and the ways that the classes are structured give our students a chance to thrive in ways that are not available in core class settings. They attribute this to several factors. First, electives are just that, elected. Though our students need some elective credits to graduate, if they don't like the subject, the teacher, or the class atmosphere, they can choose not to continue in that subject. Second, our teachers may feel they are able to give more hands-on experiences, more clearly integrated into the understanding of their subject than happens in core classes. Their state standards may be more flexible than standards in academic areas, so they may have more power to choose what and how much material is covered in a class (though this is certainly not universally true), thus allowing for responsive teaching in a way that is not as easily available to core teachers. Adjacent to this is the structural fact that elective teachers are often the only teachers to teach a specific class (we have only one band teacher, only one drama teacher, etc.) so our

elective teacher can make drastic changes quickly and readily without worrying about alignment with other teachers. Again, this is not universally true, as classes like Spanish and Catering both have multiple sections of the same class taught in different rooms by different teachers.

Our teachers, if they teach core classes, may feel that they have fewer options for helping our students succeed within the framework of their classes. Nadia lamented that her department would not allow test corrections for regular level biology classes, despite the fact that she has seen how well this works in her low-level classes, and she would like to implement it in her regular classes. Helen Lesterman felt difficulty in visibly valuing her creative students' work. While extra-curricular activities, such as a literary magazine, do provide a showcase for such work, this may not help with the day-to-day motivation and self-understanding of our students, who may be highly self-critical, as well a shy about showing their work.

Exercise of power in the classroom. Our teachers exist within both formal and informal power structures that help and/or hinder their ability to influence our students toward learning and self-sufficiency. Many of their exercises of power are covert, such as the arrangement of furniture when students enter the classroom for the first time. Others are more overt, such as grading. They are, however, very aware of how limited this power can be if our students simply decide not to work. Nadia described what she does when students make the decision not to work in class.

NH: I remind them to sit down and do it. I get a book and put it in front of them and say here, let's start working on this. I'll keep kind of coming back to them and reminding them. I'll sometimes try to reason with them.

This situation can be difficult if our students already have bad habits. Roger Starbucks said, “That’s why nobody turns anything in, because the middle schools have enabled them to be in that habit, again. When I was in school you just got a zero.” Though there are possible consequences a teacher or administrator may impose for non-compliance (like assigned detention, referral to academic intervention, and in-school suspension), the grade is the overt expression of teacher power.

Our teachers are conflicted about grades. They feel that grades are a flawed system that they are unsure how to fix, though they have tried many different strategies. Part of the issue is that grades are a compilation of many different skills and behaviors rolled into a single, summing letter (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). As a summation, a grade may not be useful for helping students reflect on their processes and understanding. It may not help our teachers to pinpoint areas of strength and weakness in understanding or performance. To help this problem, our teachers may attempt to use some form of standards-based grading. They may attempt to separate soft and hard skill grades. They may also use pre- and post-testing. None of the teacher participants in this study was completely happy with the way the grading system at the study site worked in its current form.

Regarding the issues she has with grades and what they mean to various stakeholders, Samantha said,

SJ: [I] think it is more in the kids’ minds, they hold that A at a certain level, and I have to remind them that an A means you’re truly advanced in this concept, and maybe you’re proficient in this concept, and a B is okay, and actually it has been more challenging to explain to parents than it has to kids, how those grades really

demonstrate their understanding, and not their ability to play student and play school.

Our teachers find numeric problems with the use of an A-F grading system to reflect a presumed bell curve or even distribution of achievement, with a C as an average grade. Samantha said,

SJ: To me, an A is a 10% range, and B is a 10% range, and a C is a 10% range, so then why is our F a 59% range? So, in my class, that's not it. It's a 10% range. If you turn something in, you can't get less than a 50 percent in my room, so that way I really do connect to, "is this because they don't get it, or because they're not doing it, or what is really happening?"

Our teachers have also noticed problems of consistency with expectations between different staff members and understood school policy. Helen remembered,

HL: [I] think back to certain years where there was a little focus on like grading for learning, and I want to be that. I want my grades to say if a kid has an A, they worked for an A, but then how often do we use completion points or behavior points, or points for all these, handing in the syllabus at the beginning of the year that deters all that. I don't know, this is a true question I have. I almost feel like with the 10th [grade advanced English class] kids, they feel like if they work hard, they should get an A. If they complete everything and they try, they should get an A, and I guess I would like it to be more skill, like if you got an A, that means you are an awesome reader and writer, but how do you measure all those things? And particularly with writing, where it tends to be more subjective, that can be tricky.

If our teachers are this confused, how can it be any clearer to our students? In a system that seems arbitrary, with a questioned connection between grades and learning, our teachers see our students shift focus from learning to grades. Faith Billings said,

FB: I have the constant checker-in-ers. Like they don't even want to try and think on their own, because that would be wrong. So, is this right? Is this right? Am I on the right track? So, then they don't even think for themselves.

Power and body. Our teachers experience power and body in the underachievement of their students as exhaustion, helplessness, and powerlessness. They

feel the responsibility for our students' learning, while knowing it is the students' choices that will ultimately make the difference, and that our students' history is a pattern of unsuccessful choices. They may feel that they are the embodiment of the school institution in our students' eyes at this time and in this place. In this way, they are not themselves, but a conduit being, and a filter, perhaps attempting to present the most appealing aspects of that institution in an attempt to lure our students into deeper and more meaningful engagement. At the same time, they must embody the limits imposed on the student by the school, limits of behavior, dress, and time use. As such, they may find themselves as the target of our students' general frustration with school. Finally, they must also attempt to break through this embodied mask to be their real self in our students' eyes, so as to connect with our students. They know that as long as they are seen only as the gatekeeper and enforcer, their relationship with our students will never work to motivate them.

I observed that our teachers' overall teaching style and physical presence comes across in several ways. Our teachers may be the leader and imparter of information, giving students feedback and instruction directly, in front of the group or individually. Roger's presence was certainly that of an overt and powerful leader—a director, a part of the group, but clearly the head of it—deciding direction and shaping the group into a whole. He was generally in the front of the classroom, directing with his baton. Even when he motioned his class to keep playing and wandered the room to listen to individuals and sections, the pull of attention from all the students in the room was toward him. Samantha, Faith, and Cody embodied a facilitator roll, periodically

providing direction and pulling group attention together to collaborate for understanding in group discussions, but otherwise retreating to the background, offering help where needed, but relying on students to discover information through semistructured activities. Student focus did not follow these teachers as it did in band. Helen used aspects of both director and facilitator. Nadia was cheerleader in chief, helping students to refocus not only with physical presence and words of instruction, but also with words of encouragement, building students up as she moved from desk to desk and group to group. All these templates of presence and instructional style involved the teacher as embodied guide.

If our students do drift off task, our teachers exercise their power gently. This may involve a significant look or moving into our students' space. If these techniques don't generate the desired behavior, they may speak to the student, asking a question to help our students remember expectations or help them see their own behavior. If our students still don't work, or our students do better for a while but then reengage in undesired behavior, our teachers may speak to them more directly about behavior, expectations, or how our students' behavior affects those around them. Our teachers clearly make an effort to keep behavioral issues or lack of effort from becoming power confrontations. Our teachers are aware that such confrontations are a lose/lose situation for both teacher and student. So our teachers make a conscious effort to nudge, not push. Our teachers may even choose to ignore a behavior, such as excessive phone use, as the behavior will have its own consequence in our students' grade. Different teachers clearly have different levels of ownership about student off-task behavior, though most seem to have a point at

which they disengage, distancing themselves from particularly troublesome students whom they don't believe they have the power or influence to change.

Power and relationships. Though our teachers are painfully aware of the limits of their ability to influence their students, they are also conscious that they can have a huge impact, even when they are not aware of the extent of their impact in any particular moment of interaction. This power is inherent in the teacher/student relationship.

Our teachers have direct power over our students' world. They shape our students' activities for five hours a week in the classroom, and possibly for longer if our students attempt homework outside of class. They set forth activities, decide structures and requirements within those activities, and provide resources to complete these requirements. It is up to our teachers (within the restrictions imposed by the rest of the power structures within which they function) to decide how specific and directed (or how student-driven) requirements will be, how and when to adjust requirements to take advantage of student strengths or shore up weaknesses, and what consequences will be for late or incomplete work. Our teachers decide who to call on during class discussions, where students may sit, if they may converse during different activities, and even when they may leave to go to the restroom.

When our teachers exercise their power over a student, they try to make sure it is in service to a goal. Our teachers structure activities in ways that they think will best foster student learning. This structure looks different for every teacher and every subject. Our teachers may believe that greater structure will help our students learn organization, or that dictating organization may help our students focus on content. Conversely, our

teachers may believe that letting our students find their own way of organizing will help them learn organizational skills and make material easier for them to understand. Both decisions are justified and justifiable, but in a class of 30 at least one student would have done better if our teachers favored the other option. So, our teachers must be (or learn to become) flexible to individual student needs, communicate this flexibility, and guard against the negative effects of this flexibility, all while coming across as fair so as not to undermine their own legitimacy.

NH: Sometimes if I have them in class and they're tuned in, I'll modify things to meet their needs. I've had students who just do everything and don't do well on tests, or are auditory learners or those type of things, and I'll do alternative assignments for them, or even if they just can't keep up with the organization and all that, I'll say okay, what can you do to show me that you've learned this?

Student learning is not the only goal our teachers keep in mind when exercising their power with students. They also consider student motivation, accountability, and social interaction. Cody described one way he tries to help underachieving students,

CS: If the tables are set up for seven groups, I have to put one student in every group that is probably an underachieving student, or something like that. If I call on them, I need to make sure I'm not just calling on them for the simple, easy answers, too, because they can figure that out as well. It's tricky. That's a real challenge.

Our teachers will also consider their own personal needs and goals when exercising power. They may only feel comfortable allowing one student out of class at a time for the restroom. They may have a class that tends to take long bathroom breaks as an excuse to get out of work, so may have a 5-minute break after 45 minutes of class and expect all students to take care of personal needs like getting a drink and visiting the

bathroom in that 5-minute window. These exercises of power are for student benefit, but also to help our teachers maintain their own energy and attention over the school day.

In each of these instances, our teachers exercise power and then monitor for effects. While it may feel arbitrary and one-sided to a student in a heated moment (and it may occasionally be poorly thought out in the moment for our teachers) these exercises of power are relational. Our teachers are trying to balance the needs of all in the decisions they make throughout the school day.

Invisible powers: Teacher relationships with systems. Teacher power is constrained and shaped by teacher interactions with other power systems. Some of these systems are visible and obvious, like school administration and national education law. Invisible, or at least less visible, powers are in play as well. These include other teachers, particularly within their department; the local community, its culture(s) and expectations; state requirements for public school instruction; wider cultural expectations about college readiness; and competition for student attention with the digital world.

Our teachers are expected to align with their department peers so that, for instance, an algebra class taught by one teacher is equivalent to an algebra class taught by another teacher. The school needs this for schedule changes to work at semester, for prerequisites to function, for grades to have consistent meaning, and for teachers to be able to pool data and improve practice. Departments function to assure alignment on the school level. Departments are a somewhat invisible power base to students and parents, who may not be aware that certain practices are the result of a consensus rather than the decisions of an individual teacher. Our teachers may want to allow test corrections at all

levels of a class, but if a department decides that this practice is only appropriate in low-level classes, our teachers may not feel able to do what they believe is in the best interest of students until and unless they are able to persuade their colleagues to their point of view.

Our teachers are influenced by the local community culture. This has advantages and disadvantages. The study site's local culture generally values respect, good behavior, politeness, and learning. Our community is relatively wealthy, as well (CDE, 2014b). These are advantages for student wellbeing and achievement, as they are more likely to fit with the school's "concerted cultivation in child rearing" (Lareau, 2003, p. 3), which spill over into generally easy classroom management (Davis, Rimm, & Siegle, 2011). On the other hand, its lack of diversity can make things difficult for students of color, who stand out visibly in classrooms filled with a predominantly white population. I have also observed that the school systems and occasionally some teachers neglect to make provisions for students of low SES (particularly when it comes to access to technology, and in cases where student income helps support a family). The community's identity is tied to the school (it is the only high school in the city and has been for a century), so the community can be resistant to change. This can have some odd constraining effects on teacher practices as well. Nadia explained,

NH: When I wanted to do the calm mind club, it was resisted, because well, you can't make it religious. I'm not making it religious. It's just trying to help students work through all the things that they have to deal with, and not in a way that a counselor would, because I'm not qualified for that, but in a way that I know how to just calm a mind.

While state standards are somewhat visible even outside of the walls of educational institutions—they are easily accessible on a public website—some are written in language that makes them functionally inaccessible to those outside the field of education or specific subject specialties. As such, their impact on teaching practice may be somewhat invisible. Teachers in one department may have little to no idea what standards for another department say. Yet these standards (in some departments) dictate quite specifically what content must be covered at what grade level. Our teachers may feel that the standards have sacrificed depth for breadth, leading students to value short-term grade-point achievements over meaningful learning. Our teachers also worry that standardized testing takes away even more of this valuable time and may be unable to measure growth, achievement, and understanding in important areas like critical thinking and creativity, causing these to fall in standing relative to their more measurable counterparts, making learning in the classroom shallow.

The culture throughout the state and country seems to be placing more emphasis on the importance of college education (Noddings, 2013). This, along with open enrollment policies, have placed more pressure on our school to offer high-level and specialized classes, as well as expanded extra-curricular activities, so that students can better compete for scholarships and admittance into prestigious colleges. Roger explained our teachers' skepticism about this pressure in the following way:

RS: I struggle with all these kids taking all these higher-level classes, and they're all, "Oh, I gotta get scholarships. I gotta do this, I gotta do this," and they're a sophomore. It's like, "Okay, you might want to be in high school first and graduate high school, and then go on to college. And if you make good grades in high school, I mean, you can get into college with a 2.5 GPA. You ain't going to

get any scholarships, but you're going to get in." It's like some of my opinion is I think these kids are too stressed out with trying to get into college. I think the parents are pushing them for the college thing too much, and it's really not, in my opinion, that big a deal.

A final invisible power that influences our teachers' relationships is the omnipresence of the digital world, competing for student attention. Our teachers feel that the advent of smart phones has shortened student attention spans and has perhaps inhibited our students' ability to read, understand, and follow directions. Smart phones have also created a new classroom management issue that has the potential to cause greater conflict in their relationships with students, as they are in the position of "bad guy" who takes away phone privileges; "good guy" who ignores phones completely, allowing students to sink or swim depending on their own ability to self-regulate; or "pushover" who undermines his or her own authority by stating a rule about cellphone use but failing to enforce it.

Social contract.

CS: I have a very strong belief in the fundamental reason for education is to provide an equal opportunity for everyone, and so that is kind of the big picture of why I do it, and what drives a lot of what I do is to really focus on the idea of public education and that role and not corrupting that idea. From an individual standpoint, to me, education, that is part of it, the idea of giving everybody an opportunity, so in general I would say I like to do things that give kids an opportunity maybe that nothing else does, whether it is just simply learning something interesting and new, or something that is more practical that can help them become a better learner and help them become a better citizen, becoming a better student ... being an educator gives me that opportunity to help others.

The power structure of school is that of a social contract: in exchange for giving up a degree of freedom and autonomy, the school offers something of value, namely, an education, and a diploma, proof of the completion of that education (Carroll, 2015). Our

teachers believe in the value of what they offer our students—when it works. However, doubts about the validity of grading, the contrast between hoop-jumping and real learning, and the perceived decreasing value of a high school diploma have our teachers wondering if our school is holding up its end of the contract with all its students. Roger stated,

RS: I think we are a fraud, because we put up a front, and we say all this stuff that everybody wants to hear, you know, but we don't necessarily really prepare the kid for a real world because we, in a way, some teachers lie to them, and they make them feel all this stuff, "Oh, all this life is good." And they don't really say, "If you want to make it in the world, you need to freaking go to work on time. You need to be responsible. You need to show up 15 minutes early for your shift." We don't talk about any of that stuff. That's real world.

If our school system has broken the social contract with our students, are our students obligated to hold up their end of the deal? Our teachers know that once our students see the nature of the social contract, and if they feel they have not been given good value for their sacrifice of time, power, and autonomy, they may decide that our school and our teachers have no real power after all.

The child cries from the crowd, "But he hasn't got anything on!" (Andersen, 1949/2017).

The Parent and Power

Power and time. Our parents feel a distortion of timed expectations, a sense that something is wrong as their child fails to conform to a model of growing independence tied to their age and grade. Our parents may then attempt to try to increase their influence over our students' behavior at a time when this influence is expected to be decreasing, to

protect them from themselves, to buy more time for our students to grow into their expected responsibilities, to keep the doors of opportunity open a little longer.

One of the ways our parents try to hold consequences at bay for our students is to try and increase control over how our students spend their time. Our parents have tried to do this using everything they can think of. They have tried providing different systems for getting organized. They have talked to our students about the possible consequences of their choices. Our parents have discussed their own experiences when they were in similar situations and explained what they did to make things better. They may have tried coaching our students through comprehension problems in homework, though this may be getting harder as our students progress to more difficult content. All of these are attempts to help our students find motivation within themselves to use time wisely.

Unfortunately, they don't work. So our parents try to increase their control and decrease our students' likelihood of making a self-destructive choice. Our parents confiscate a cell phone or an Xbox. Edward said,

E: If you don't do the things you're supposed to do, you lose things, or things are taken away from you. I'm not going to take your room away from you. I'm not going to take food away, so you lose privileges. Those are the things that you like the most. That's where I'm going to hit you.

Our parents designate a specific time for homework and monitor to see if our students comply. Our parents and our students are now in opposition. "The very process of surveillance that goes with coercive power contributes to the influencing agent having greater distrust and further demeaning the target of influence" (Raven, 1992, p. 230).

Edward explained some of the ways he has tried to protect Otto from his own habits,

E: We cautioned him, “Do you really want to? If you want to take an AP class, choose a subject that you’re really interested in and see what it’s like. . . .” But no, he was going to right the ship, so I could have done one of two things; I could have put my foot down and said no, I’ll dictate what your schedule is, but I know what would happen then. It would have been “You’re ruining my future” type thing, or I could sit back and say all right, this is your schedule.

Our parents are trying to be flexible and allow our students to have some choice over how to spend their school time, but at the same time they voice skepticism that our students are making the right choice. Trust lessens on both sides.

Our parents know that their surveillance of our students’ homework activities is often not successful, either due to inability to monitor consistently because of their own busy schedule, or due to incomplete information, where our students may tell our parents, “I don’t have homework,” when they actually do (whether the homework is forgotten, or the student is lying, or both). “Unsuccessful coercion can lead to further rejection of the influencing agent, and even greater intractability in the face of later influence attempts” (Raven, 1992, p. 233). Our parents have failed to successfully influence our students to do their homework. The next time our students may also “forget.” After all, it worked before. Once coercive power comes into play, both parties can fall into feedback loops that draw them further apart, as they attempt to justify their positions to themselves (Raven, 1992, p. 233).

This isn’t working either. So, our parents, exhausted and unsure what to do, look for other options:

E: It’s created a lot of stress, to the point where I think we both, we’ve even said, “Hey, if you just simply don’t want to be in school, and this is how it’s going to be the next two years, let’s investigate the whole GED thing, get that. You can get

out and figure out what you want to do, and maybe, maybe the light bulb will come on later on in life.”

Our parents may also reflect on their own experiences in school and contrast them to our students’ experiences, looking for a cause for our students’ difficulties. While our parents most often place responsibility for disorganization and disengagement on our students, they may also see teacher flexibility as a contributing factor.

E: You have teachers who want the kids to do well, so I don’t do my work, I don’t pay attention in class, I get another chance, I get another chance, I get another chance. Yes, you can turn this in tomorrow, but don’t be late again. He’ll milk that for everything that it’s worth.

This now runs our students into trouble if they encounter a hard deadline. Our parents are worried that flexibility in the past has fostered poor work habits, leading to unreasonable expectations that don’t prepare our students for the world beyond high school.

Power and space. All study participants were affluent enough to reside in single family homes in which each student had their own room. Two of the homes in question were built (or were in the process of being built) by the family, so, in these cases, the parents had an unusual degree of control over the home space. These two homes seemed somewhat more spacious than the others I observed but were otherwise similar. All the homes had individual bedrooms, a kitchen and adjoining dining room area with a large table, and a living room of some kind, with comfortable furniture and a television set. Some homes were decorated with family photographs and artwork created by our students and their siblings. Others were more austere, with little to no visible artwork, featuring instead indoor plants, curtains, and large windows. They ranged from fastidiously clean (possibly tidied for my visit, though I didn’t ask) to the lived-in

messiness of a busy household. One interview took place in the not-yet-completed home of the participants building it, and we sat on lawn chairs in the empty living room for the interview. These spaces conveyed a somewhat taken-for-granted comfortable level of wealth and power, though parental stories showed that they had worked hard for this financial security. It was obvious that the parents were comfortable with, even proud of, their homes.

Our parents and our students share the home space, so this is where many issues of power and space play out. Within the home there are two primary areas of power interaction. The first is the kitchen table. Our parents may have designated the kitchen table as a work space for our students once they get home from school. This area is easily monitored and is particularly convenient if there are multiple children in the home doing homework at the same time. In this space, our parents monitor our students' behavior, attempting to keep them focused on work for school. While it is a shared space, it is the parent's space at this time, in the same way that a classroom is a teacher's space. Consequences for off-task behavior in this space are dictated by our parents, whether it is subtle, such as the disappointment and loss of trust when our students are caught using their computer on something other than homework, or something more overt. Megan described,

M: She had struggled with math a little bit and [her dad] would work on homework with her and just, he'd yell and stuff when she couldn't get the problems or if she couldn't focus. ... It's that thing where she's afraid she's going to fail, and she doesn't even try, and her mind kind of shuts off.

This is not to say that all interactions in this space are negative. Our parents and students may feel this time as one of family togetherness and support. In such an instance, interaction is empowering for student and parent.

The power dynamic tilts in the other direction in our students' room. Though our parents may technically own it and all of its contents, it is full of what is considered the student's stuff, arranged by the student, either deliberately or as a result of past travels and activities through the space. It has a door, which can be closed for privacy and seclusion. This is a place where our students practice ownership of space, finding what allows them to be comfortable. Even if our parents direct the level of orderliness and cleanliness, the space is our students'. While our parents can enter this space, attempts to direct activities within it are more easily resisted. Our students may see this place as a refuge, and our parents may (or may not) be reluctant to violate this sense. Nevertheless, our students' room is likely to be the other main space in which they complete homework (or don't). Our parents may vacillate between checking on homework focus and progress when our students are working in their room and keeping their distance, allowing our students to work out homework issues on their own.

Power dynamics also play out in digital space. Of the three digital spaces school provides for parents and students (IC, Canvas, and PLATO), our parents interact the most with IC. They may check grades as often as once a day but will usually do so once or twice a week. Megan said, "It is easier to catch [when she is lying about missing work] now because of the campus portal, so you can see pretty much right away." Like the kitchen table, IC is a way to monitor completion of work. They may find IC frustrating,

as it only reports problems after the fact, when there may be little or nothing they can do to help the situation. Our parents, like our students and our teachers, are unfamiliar enough with Canvas that it has yet to prove a useful tool.

Our parents have mixed feelings about PLATO. On the one hand, it is a chance to repair past mistakes at an age when a student needs to be able to make mistakes before they have real consequences in the real world. On the other hand, endless chances may teach our students that there is no need to generate inner motivation to perform a task well on the first try if one is not in the mood. There will always be another chance, so focusing on what one is doing right now doesn't really matter. Our parents also doubt the rigor of the PLATO classes. If a semester's credit can be earned in two weeks, it must not be as rigorous as the real thing.

Power and body. Power is felt in the body, as is its lack. There is the positive flush of emotion felt when our students overcome a difficulty and suddenly feel that they can accomplish anything. There is the light they then pass to our parents who share in the joy of their accomplishment, the feeling of sparking pride and affection in another person's eyes, and the feeling of pride and possibly surprise as our parents see our students do what was once out of their reach.

There is the drop in the pit of the stomach when our students realize that they have forgotten something important and that there is nothing they can do about it now, and the sympathetic pain our parents feel, along with stinging disappointment and helplessness that this has happened again. There is the listless exhaustion of not knowing what to do, and the guilt and shame as our parents wonder what they may have done

wrong, what else they could or should be doing. Our parents feel fear for what will happen to our students if these patterns of underachievement continue. So our parents come to feel the separateness of their child, the autonomy of our students' choices, and the limits of our parents' power to influence their choices as they move through adolescence into adulthood, which will happen whether they are ready or not.

Our parents express power in the body by their physical proximity to our students. Our parents know this, and plan for it, checking grades frequently, talking to our students daily about work that needs to be done, consequences for incomplete or missing work, and even just checking in to see how our students' day went. By being physically present in our students' lives, our parents are fostering an ongoing relationship of love and support, but also are attempting to influence our students' behavior and task commitment, trying to help them find motivation, organization, and energy to fulfill their school obligations. Yet our parents may be away more than they would like. Many parents in the study have jobs that require travel, late office hours, or other circumstances that prevent them from being in physical proximity with our students when our students are home. In some cases, it is one parent who is often gone, so our other parent attempts to fill in the gap. Lack of physical proximity limits parental influence because it reduces our parents' ability to implement consequences (Raven, 1992), or at least puts these consequences at a distance, which can make them less compelling (Mischel, 2014).

Finally, as our students grow, the physical difference in size can change the power dynamic between parent and child. Teri said, "Oh, he challenges me something fierce, something terrible. And, of course, when they get taller than me, then of course it's even

more so.” Physical power has shifted from parent to child, and if our students no longer see their parents’ power as legitimate, don’t believe that our parents knows more than they do, don’t value the relationship enough to worry about damaging it, see nothing that their parents could give them as having value in that moment, and no longer fear physical coercion, our parents have no power bases left (Raven, 1992).

Power and relationships.

Parental power relationships with the school. Our parents have many positive social influence interactions with the school and the school system, including with our teachers. They feel that our teachers respond quickly to communications and concerns. Hazel said, “If I have a question or a concern I email the teacher and usually get an email back right away.” This helps our parents feel that they can get the information they need in order to act for our students’ interests. This is important, because our parents tend to take an active role. Melody said,

MI: I believe that because we wouldn’t sit back and say, even when he was on the IEP, he wanted to come off it, and he was achieving at a level where they just said, “We can’t keep him on this.” I said, “You have no idea how much work outside of the school that is involved. We had him in Learning Rx, we had him in Mathnasium, we had tutors, we are one on one.” He would still be on IEP, I have no doubt, if we hadn’t invested all of that in him.

Unfortunately, not all of our parents’ power relationships with the school are positive. Our parents feel that the school’s main focus is to prepare students for a four-year college, and that since our students may not be headed in that direction, they may be left by the wayside. This is particularly true if our students have learned to do just enough to avoid attention, by getting Ds instead of Fs, for instance. Our parents feel that this

intense focus on high-level academics also means that some low-level programming is neglected. Melody said,

MI: They know that is who we're catering to. ... For example, the math track at [the school] is Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II, and if you happen to be someone like me who says wait a minute, there's an Intermediate Algebra class, then you might pick that up, but the state requirement, the top class you have to have, Algebra I. So why don't we have a General Math, a Pre-Algebra and an Algebra I class? So they can be successful in General Math, be successful in Pre-Algebra, and be successful in Algebra I, and then if they want to take the other, but the state level you have to have to graduate is Algebra I, and I had that discussion. I said this is crazy. I said George is not the only kid who struggles in math at [this school], so you set them up to fail at the beginning, and I was told this is the track we have, and I said I can't believe this. ... I think we have done a disservice in some of our, at some levels for those kids who are the lower level, lower achievers, but they have skills. And they probably could be successful if we took a back seat and said wait a minute, what are we doing here?

Our parents may also have issues with the GT programming and identification systems at the school. They see a disconnect between programming and qualification.

Katie explained,

K: She's never taken Advanced Math, and in Advanced Language Arts, they took her out of it in seventh grade, because she didn't work well with groups. It pissed me off, to be frank. It was like, what's that got to do with whether or not she understands Language Arts? ... Her fourth grade teacher told us ... she was one of the most insightful readers she's ever had. ... She can understand poetry, ... she understood it better than most adults, so I get that feedback, and then [they took her out].

This disconnect may cause our parents to be reluctant to get our students identified as gifted in the first place. They may perceive the GT program as extra work for our students (as opposed to more appropriate work) and believe that, since our students are already struggling in school, GT identification would make the problem worse, not better. Edward stated,

E: I think at the time that he kind of had the identifier [for GT] or whatever, he was already having, we already knew we were having problems with Otto. We just decided that was, we can't even get the basics working here; why throw that expectation on top of it?

Our parents, like our teachers, may see GT programming as a possible hinderance to improved school performance, rather than a help.

Our parents may have been discouraged from getting a twice exceptional child identified. As Katie recounted,

K: I was like, "The pediatrician thinks maybe we should get her assessed [for ADD inattentive and for GT.]" "Well, we don't see that," and then they called and were all defensive, because you know, they're required to by law, but then he was so defensive from the administration building that I was like, "You know what? We're not going to get an accurate read." And Gene and I both felt like the Gifted Ed was kind of pointless, so we were like, "Oh, just forget it." So, we didn't have her tested, and we probably should have, but, coulda, woulda, shoulda. It is what it is.

This is part of a larger pattern of frustration with communication and consequent powerlessness. Our parents may feel frustrated with IC because they can only see problems when it is too late to solve them. They want to be able to see details of assignments and deadlines so they can have a better idea of what our students should be doing, as our students have trouble keeping track of this or may lie.

K: The damage is done. They send us this email, congratulations, your student is failing... When we go to the school, they always say, "The student has to be the one. The students need to advocate for themselves." I was like, "Are you teaching them how to advocate for themselves? Do they know how to advocate for themselves?" I can't do anything, because I'm the parent, and, ahhhhh, that's so aggravating for me, because it's like, how am I supposed to help her? What is the point of Canvas or Campus Portal? You inform me, but I'm not supposed to do anything about it. Gotcha. It's like, okay, that's great. It's just so frustrating that I just am like, no, I'm not checking my email. I'm not checking my, I don't. I just delete it, because I'm like, so you're putting me in a codependent situation, where it's my responsibility, but I can't do anything about it.

Parental power in relation to our students. Our parents do have power to influence our students, even if that power is limited. They can cultivate interests and encourage. Megan remembered, “I always encouraged them. I always did summer reading challenges with them, and I would create tests for them, based on the stuff they had read, and they loved that sort of stuff. That was fun for them.” They can monitor their behavior and impose consequences for what they consider to be bad choices.

Despite efforts to monitor grades and completion of homework, our parents know they cannot *make* our students do it. Megan said, “There have been times where I’ve sat down at the table with her, and said we’re going to do homework, and we’re not getting up, and she’ll just sit there and not do homework.” If our students don’t feel motivated to change, our parents’ options are limited. Gene said, “it’s like she doesn’t care if she flunks a class.” Our parents may try to persuade our students to make decisions that (they believe) will promote future happiness, but they may not be successful.

M: When it came time to register for classes, she didn’t register for [orchestra] and I told her, “You have to do it.” She’s like, “No, no, no, I’ll do tryouts and if I make it then I’ll add it, and if not...” I was like, “No, you really need to add it, because you’re kind of telling [the orchestra teacher] by not signing up for it that you’ve given up.” I couldn’t convince her ... I think she’s really going to regret it.

Our parents see a disconnect between our students’ prediction of the consequences of their actions and the reality of them and feel unable to shift these perceptions. They feel that with this distorted view, our students won’t be able to make informed, mature decisions. But our parents can’t change these perceptions. Our parents see how our students are trapped in their own point of view, and they don’t know how to

influence or broaden that view to something more (in their opinion) accurate. Talking about Finn's view of her brother, Megan said,

M: He's got it all figured out, and jokingly, "I'm sure she'll say you guys love Steve more," and she kind of laughs, but I can tell there is some of that. I think she feels like we are comparing them, in a lot of ways. And I've told her, too, that's not the normal trajectory for kids coming out of high school ... that's just who he is, and you have different talents.

Our parents desperately want to help our students do better in school. They do everything that they can think of in their power to do so, to motivate our students and help fill in gaps that our students may have in soft skills and understanding curricula. However, it is up to our students whether they will accept or reject our parents' help. Rejection hurts. Katie described a time she tried to help Bella prepare a "getting to know you" presentation for a class,

K: So, I was like, "Oh, we could put a song to your life. What kind of answers, or, what kind of questions do they have?" Really just trying to have fun with her on it, and so she wouldn't tell me what the questions were.

Our parents are ultimately flummoxed by this kind of rejection and may attribute it to normal adolescent behavior. As Kate put it, "I'm Mom. I know nothing."

As our students reject help, our parents feel a loss of their own dreams for our students and the relationship between them. Edward says "I just always thought that if we're going to show them this example and we're going to explain things to them they're going to go, 'Oh, okay, I get it. Thanks, Dad.'"

The Student and Power

Power and time. Time itself exerts a huge influence on students in high school. There never seems to be enough of it. Time also interacts with the power that others have

(or expect to have) over what a student “should” be doing. Because time is limited, it must be budgeted, and the power to budget time bounces between students, parents, teachers, and the school system.

The school schedule is the first system that rations student time. Study participants feel that scheduling requirements create an academically heavy freshman year. The older our students get and the more required credits they accrue, the more choice and power they have in determining their own schedule. By senior year, our students have the option to take open blocks and lots of electives, or they may be required to make up failed classes, particularly if they didn’t do so in summer school or through online credit recovery.

Each day at school, time is divided into four classes plus a lunch in an alternating block schedule. Our students are expected to be in each class for almost 90 minutes, and there are consequences if too many classes are missed. These consequences range from notifications sent home to requirements to attend truancy court. The school keeps records for tardiness and attendance, monitoring student presence throughout the day. The ability to monitor student presence is limited to physical presence. Our students may be in their chairs for 90 minutes, and still be mentally absent—daydreaming—for 80 of those minutes. Our students have the power to spend their time mentally detached from class activities (though they may lack the ability to keep this from happening). Our teachers then have the power to impose consequences in the form of missed participation points or work completion grades or may let consequences fall naturally in (possibly) lower summative scores.

None of the study participants seemed to have (physical) attendance issues. However, some mentioned that missing school due to illness (particularly if the illness lasted for a week or more) had created achievement problems at some point in the past. Our students have difficulty making up work in a timely fashion, and so get chronically behind in class, missing points for work submitted late in units following the absence as they struggle to catch up. Our students may (or may not) self-advocate for more time, but this may also be unsuccessful. Once they have missed a significant number of classes, our students feel helpless to catch up.

In general, our students feel constrained by the school schedule, though Steve likes the alternating block because “it gives me a few days to get my homework done.” They feel that classes give too much homework, impinging on private time when they should be able to choose what to spend their time doing. They also feel that the homework load is unpredictable, sometimes coming all at once, sometimes almost nonexistent. They have no control over the amount of homework or the deadlines, and they may not be able to anticipate how much self-directed time they will have from day to day. Activities like extra band practice before a competition make budgeting limited time even harder.

Our parents may choose to allocate our students’ time by monitoring homework, limiting access to technology and extracurricular activities, or even by limiting a student’s class choices. However, parents can only influence. It is up to the students to direct attention and spend time as they choose (whether or not they realize they are making a choice at all).

Allocation of time by the school system reflects the school's priorities. Allocation of time by students reflects student priorities. These priorities may not align, and when our students choose to follow their own priorities rather than the school's, the school uses its power, particularly its power to award credit, to reflect that disconnect. Otto says that his trouble with grades is "usually it's I'm pursuing different interests, like sometimes I'd draw during classes when I was supposed to be taking notes. And even then, it wasn't a problem with tests, it was doing assignments." Otto tests very well, and often feels like taking notes is a waste of time because he already knows the material, so he won't do this work, which he considers to be hoop-jumping. The work is graded (often just for completion), and so his grade drops. He is not offered the option to test out of work due to previous knowledge, and so his grade may not reflect his knowledge and understanding.

Our students may also find themselves paralyzed by the disconnect between their own priorities and those held by parents and school. They may feel they should be able to follow their parent's priorities or work in the way their peers do, but they seem unable to do so, for reasons they can't articulate. They may lack the tools to move forward on their chosen (compliant) path because they may not realize they are fighting their own priorities. Fear of failure may also impinge on student agency. This may manifest in procrastination. "I don't know why I can't get myself to do this," becomes, "I can't do this because I don't have the time."

Our students also feel that the curricular content they are asked to spend precious time on is not the content that will help them in their future life, and they fear the

consequences of these gaps in knowledge. They fear that the knowledge they need by the graduation will not be provided. Abby said,

A: I think that there's a lot of real world stuff that we don't teach enough, like how to do your taxes. We know taxes are a thing. We know you go to jail if you don't do them, but we don't know how to do them, you know?

They can choose what classes they sign up for but cannot always tell from course descriptions if they will cover the content that they feel they need. This is choice, but not necessarily informed choice. Our students no longer automatically get meetings with their counselors to discuss course selections—there are simply too many students for the number of counselors—so unless they are extremely proactive in researching prospective classes, they may find themselves wasting time on things they already know, failing classes that don't meet expectations, and missing skills they need for the future. They feel lost in a system that doesn't really see them as individuals yet dictates their use of time based on general, one-size-fits-all requirements that are supposed to ensure future success. This can be overwhelming and frightening.

Power and space. The constant presence of others has made our students experts at retreating into internal space to find room to get away from the constant onslaught of other people. They need this retreat to recharge (Cain, 2012), and this withdrawal is common in creative people (Martindale, 1999). The crowded space of school is exhausting, and the inability to find a physical space for stillness, for redress from constant activity, erodes their power. They cannot control the environment in such a way as to meet their needs in this space. The counseling office did convert a storage area into

a mindfulness room. However, to use this space, our students must choose to miss part or all of a class.

Most teachers use the front board or projection screen to post a day's agenda in some form, whether it is the band's rehearsal order for the day, or directions on how to access assignments in Google Classroom or Canvas. This practice allows our students to anticipate what they will need to do for that class and helps them transition from expectation to expectation, room to room, and class to class. Both accommodations classes I observed (Everyday Algebra and Accommodations Biology) have a place for students to store their binders so that these would not get lost and would be available for the student each class, helping less organized students stay organized. In general, resources that students need, from colored pencils to textbooks to mixing bowls are in established spaces, readily accessible to the students, empowering them to take care of their own needs on their own time table.

The arrangement of individual classrooms creates various power dynamics in those spaces. The core classes I observed all started the hour with desks facing front for teacher-directed activities. In this arrangement, the teacher is in control, and the students focus on the teacher. Though the geography of the room empowered the teacher at the beginning and end of class, most whole-class activities I observed consisted of memory refreshment and group discussion, not lecture. All academic teachers eventually had students break into smaller groups, often rearranging desks to do so. Some classes also did individual work for limited amounts of time. Individual work was surprisingly rare and often included an expectation that the individual work would be shared with others at

some point during the work process. This empowers peers to help each other, but it also causes anxiety for the study participants.

Who is powerful in the classroom? Our students are rarely consciously aware of these limits to teacher power. The teacher is their contact with school system authority, and the classroom is the teacher's space. It is our students' job to conform to the teacher's expectations. Our students may attempt to negotiate with the teacher so that they can manipulate the space and activities within it to meet their needs—Finn, for instance, was able to convince a teacher to let her work alone to complete a group assignment rather than work with a group, and Abby is often able to make her “origami bricks” during lectures after explaining to her teachers that this helps her concentrate. However, our students often find that they are not able to be successful in these negotiations—as when Otto got in trouble for drawing when he was supposed to be taking notes, and when Abby was not allowed to listen to music during silent reading.

The consequences for noncompliance with teacher power in the classroom vary. Our students may have various in-class consequences, like the confiscation of a cell phone, being called on to answer a question when they don't volunteer, or a teacher may take our students aside for conversation and redirection. Noncompliance can result in being sent from the classroom to the office for consequences delivered by a higher authority. A teacher may contact home. Often, grades go down. The consequences for noncompliance in a teacher power space are negative consequences for our students, who may or may not be aware that the teacher feels negative consequences as well.

Classrooms are not the only school space, and teachers are not the only people who hold influence over our students. While at school, Bella feels comfortable and relaxed in the band areas and in classes where she knows other students. If she is in a space where she doesn't know anyone, she is not comfortable, and her instinct is to hide herself. She has little to no power or agency. Though activities such as group work and group discussions are designed to empower students to be responsible for their own learning, social anxiety, differences in learning style, level, and priorities, as well as feelings of difference from peers, make these situations ones of low agency for our students. They fear the judgement of their peers. Bella doesn't want to feel like they will see her as "bossy" when making a spaghetti bridge in a group, for instance, and Otto thinks his friends find it odd that he likes to read and knows so much about history already. In most classes, our students feel that their teachers and peers have power in the classroom. When they make choices to depart from expectations in these spaces, it is generally their grades and social standing that suffer. Teacher and peer power in the school space often feel punitive.

Who is powerful in the home spaces? Home spaces are the other space in which our students spend most of their time. Power in the home is variable. Steve, Bella, and Abby all find that power dynamics depend on whether they are at home alone or with supervision. If home alone, they tend to feel in charge. Our students will follow their own interests as the proximal pressure of school and school authorities recede. When parents are home, parents become the proxies of school power, reminding about school obligations, even in this space that our students feel is theirs, and in which they feel

school has less of a right to hold sway. They may feel the most control and power in their private room. Communal space (often the kitchen table) is a place where parents can monitor to make sure that our students are fulfilling school obligations first.

While for most students, home is a refuge from the obligations and crowds at school, this is not universal. For Finn, one home—her mother’s, where she lives now—is a refuge, but the other home—her dad’s—is not. For Otto, by the end of the interviews, home had become a hostile place. At the beginning of the study, he felt his parents tried to control everything he did, having him do any computer-based homework at the kitchen table so that they could monitor his work. At the end of the school year, he told me they had “dropped off any sort of effort on their part,” and displayed “disappointment, and even at times contempt for what was going on at school.” Otto now tries to ignore them as much as possible, retreating from that powerless place to an internal world. His time spent daydreaming has increased, as he withdraws into himself.

Internal space is a place of power and agency for our students. They may write fiction. Daydreaming is common. Internal space is a world in which they can control setting, characters, variables, and plot, as they play out ideas untethered by the rules of the real world, but it is not always friendly. The internal world is also the residence of the internal critic, the home of negative self-talk. Though Finn described a growing awareness of this voice and how it undermined her, as well as her attempts to fight it, many participants believe what the negative self-talk tells them. This aspect of internal space drains agency and leaves our students feeling helpless.

Digital space may be a positive or negative place for our students. Abby considers herself to be bad at computers. “Computers hate me.” So, if the computer is the only way to turn in or access work, particularly make-up work, it makes her feel helpless. Steve, on the other hand, finds the digital space to be an empowering place (as long as he is the curator of his experience, not necessarily following a teacher’s step-by-step instructions). He can pursue his own interests in his own time there.

Power and body. Few student participants described feelings of power in the body directly, other than descriptions of situations that made them feel frustrated or sad. I had more direct understanding of their embodied experiences with power by watching their body language. Embodied power is communicated in posture, eye contact, vocal tone and speed of speech, gesture, and facial expression. It is especially present in the emotions these things convey. During the interviews, student participants expressed more joy, ease, and enthusiasm when discussing situations and activities in which they felt a sense of power and agency. Activities such as writing, playing an instrument, riding scooter, playing soccer, twirling, drawing, learning how to build a computer from watching internet videos, all these were discussed with animation, bright eyes, fast speech, and extensive detail. These activities were loved, and they made the students feel empowered. They could do these things well and enjoyed doing them.

Postures slumped, voice volume and pitch dropped, eyes searched for someplace other than my face to look when students talked about disorganization, inability to complete or turn in work, inability to concentrate, inability to successfully communicate or negotiate with a teacher or parent, all situations in which students felt helpless, in

which they had no power. In this way, power is felt in the body. It is expansion and feeling large and lively, or contraction and feeling small and invisible.

Embodied power and school achievement or underachievement are also present in the high school attendance requirement, and absence may be a contributing factor in our students' underachievement. Abby missed a week of school in her freshman year, and had great difficulty recovering from this, forgetting to take make up tests and having difficulty turning in work digitally. Otto missed a week of school during the year of the study and was never able to catch up in his Biology class, always ending up a week (therefore a unit) behind, losing points on all submitted work from that point forward, and eventually failing the class. Absence is an obstacle to achievement, and, combined with low motivation and poor organizational skills, it can be devastating.

Power and relationships.

Parent(s). Adolescence is a time of testing the guideline of safety and identity set forth by parents, a time of questioning, and, perhaps, reaching different conclusions about who to be, how to be, and what to value (Berk, 2012; Siegel, 2011). The potential for a great deal of conflict between parent and child exists during adolescence. The child is in the process of accruing personal power and asserting independence. The parent still tries to protect the child, from others, but also from their choices, actions, inactions, and parent-perceived missing skills.

Our parents use several techniques to try to protect our students and guide their actions and choices, in other words, to exercise power to influence our students. One of the most common actions they take is to monitor grades. Our parents do this by checking

the online gradebook Infinite Campus (IC) through a program feature called Campus Portal. This tool allows parents to see their child's current grade in any class. Our students are aware that their parent(s) check IC regularly, and know that if grades drop, our parents will talk to them about it. Abby describes what this feels like.

A: With the intervening thing, it's more like a reminder to do it, not like ... a grrr thing. ... Sometimes it's like they're supportive and they want me to do good in life and other times it's like, "You've told me to do my homework five times. I promise you I'm doing it!"

Sometimes it matters to her what her parents think about her school achievement, and other times she thinks "I'm the one doing it, and shouldn't I do it to the best of my ability?"

Often, our parents attempt to establish rapport with our students by somehow acknowledging that the work they are being assigned is either not necessary for learning but is necessary for a grade, or is necessary for learning in order to get a grade even if our students don't see the relevance of the learning for later life. By doing this, our parents may be attempting to let our students know that our parents understand where they are coming from, trying to strengthen the relationship and help our students feel seen and supported. At the same time, this could undermine the legitimacy of the teacher or school in general and what motivation our students have to complete work.

If logic fails, our parents may then threaten or actually impose negative consequences if missing work is not turned in or grades improved. But such extrinsic motivators don't seem to work for our students, at least in the moment of decision. Bella doesn't believe her parents will go through with dropping one of her band classes. Otto

procrastinates, even when his parents take his Xbox. Abby knows that she has already decided she will do some homework, and that she won't do it, even when she tells herself she will do it later.

Our parents also monitor behavior, especially homework completion. To our students this feels like a lack of trust, a reminder of character flaws, and an intrusion into freedom, choice, and privacy. Interestingly, when his parents stopped trying to enforce better work habits, Otto felt both relief and a loss. In his second interview, Otto said, "Sometimes support becomes domination, and they oversee everything I do, and I lose any autonomy to do what I would like to do, and I guess I kind of like them being absent, but at the same time the structure is gone." He has been depending on them to force him to keep things together, and now that this structure is gone, he is not sure how to replace it with his own.

Parental support of creative endeavors is important to our students. Abby enthusiastically shared her music with her mom, and George's parents took him on out-of-state trips to participate in twirling competitions. Our students feel supported and validated in their creativity when our parents support and rejoice in it. This helps give our students the confidence and freedom to take risks, even the risk (in George's and Finn's cases) of possibly building a career on their creativity. Parental support has the power to help our students reach higher with confidence.

On the other hand, our students may find parental support of creative endeavors to be conditional. Otto described his parents' reaction,

O: Some of them [creative activities], they like. Some of them they don't. As long as I'm doing it, they see everything has its proper time, and I agree with that, even though I don't put it into practice. They're OK with it when I'm doing it when I don't have something else to be doing. But, when I have homework to be done and I'm doing one of my other things I like to do, they will get on me.

Lack of parental support for creative endeavors tends to provoke our students to attempt to adopt perceived parental priorities. Otto and Finn both do this, Finn asserting at the beginning of the year that she believed that school would be better now that she had realized the learning possible at school was something she valued, and Otto asserting that he agreed with his parents that one should sit down and do the most important work through to the end before starting the next thing. This didn't work out for either student.

Otto admires and believes in his parents' values and prioritization of things like keeping life in balance, fulfilling obligations to others once one has undertaken them (obligations including taking higher level courses), and doing "important" work first. His parents' behavior (like denying him use of the printer for reference images for drawing) communicates to Otto that they don't value his self-driven creative endeavors as highly as they value his school commitments. While Otto says that he agrees with them, his actions don't necessarily back this up. He procrastinates, draws rather than taking notes in class, and spends a lot of time avoiding his schoolwork. He is in conflict.

O: The situation at home is kind of toxic. It's pretty plain to see that there's an atmosphere of disappointment and even at times contempt for what's going on at school. I think more than anything I've just kind of sealed myself off. I try to ignore those kind of things.

Teachers. One of the clear ways in which our students feel the influence of their teachers is through the personal connections they forge. The personal connections are

varied, from a feeling of similarity—Abby says, “Mr. Starbuck is a band nerd, and I’m a band nerd, so it kind of works.”—to respect for teacher knowledge and ability—Abby continues,

A: He took the freshman band I that I was in ... and turned it into like, from this band that plays music because they want to, to like this band that plays music because they play music. It was a really cool thing and kind of intimidating at first.

Our students are aware if the teacher/student connection is missing. Abby states, “With some teachers that I’ve had in the [other district I used to attend] I knew they were in it for the paycheck not really to teach the kids and all that stuff.” In Abby’s experience, this teacher made no attempt to make a connection with the students, and so lost credibility. Our students also know that a teacher could like them personally but dislike their behavior or attitude. Otto described this.

O: I think most of my teachers like me. I think what they don’t like is my problem with the content. Most teachers probably don’t like it when you come into a class and you’re like, “I don’t want to be here. This is my least favorite class.”

Personal connection with the teacher is perceived as separate from student performance and can endure as an avenue of communication and influence even when our students feel they may be a disappointment. The student’s negative self-talk can undermine this connection, as when Finn said she assumes that teachers don’t like her because she wouldn’t want a student who behaved the way she does. Frequent reminders that she is liked and valued help counter this isolating internal negativity.

Our teachers have some power to tailor teaching to student learning styles, or allow students to tailor their own experiences to take advantage of their strengths. They

can also insist that students work against their strengths, dwelling in their weak areas. When our students are able to work in their strength areas, they generally experience higher levels of engagement and learning. As Bella says, “I found that I enjoy things that I’m good at more than what I’m not good at.” When asked to work in their weak areas, with little flexibility to change situations to exploit their strengths, our students’ attention wanders, and they learn less (Smallwood & Schooler, 2015). This is not surprising, but it is one of the areas in which student participants are most aware of their power or feel its lack.

Our students tend to prefer hands-on activities to lecture, or like a mix of the two. While Finn expressed a preference for lecture in the first interview, this preference seemed to be part of her “mantra” to help her change into a more successful academic student at the beginning of the year and had fallen away by the end of the year. Otto also expressed a preference for lecture, but struggled greatly in his heavy lecture classes, and expressed a dislike of repeated information, something he seemed to encounter regularly in lecture classes.

Our students may dislike presentations or even answering questions in front of a class. These situations make them feel exposed, yet they feel helpless to opt out of them. When in these situations, they risk judgement from their peers.

Our students don’t like group work, except in specific circumstances. They see several problems with group work. First, our students do not like to do group work for a summative grade, particularly if everyone in a group receives the same grade. They do not feel socially comfortable in groups of people they don’t know, and they are

concerned about being judged for being bossy and about having to do all of the work for a group if they have the greatest amount of knowledge (which is often the case). They have less antipathy for group work if they know and like their teammates, and if the group work is used to practice new skills or acquire information, rather than to demonstrate learning for a grade. Finn was able to self-advocate, convincing one teacher to let her work on her own rather than with a group, and she felt this let her do the assignment more successfully. While Bella disliked group work, she did see it as an opportunity to meet others. Our students feel groupwork is awkward and distancing, with no support for team building or roll assignments. Our students are put in groups to work so that they can learn to work in groups, but the skills for working successfully in groups are not taught. The possible exception to this was band.

None of the students see band or twirling as group work, though the group is integral to the activity. It may be this inherent integration that causes the difference in perspective and attitude about ensemble work, though Finn disliked the group aspects of orchestra. It may be that band had social supports like band-camp to build group unity. The band teacher has a strong belief in the importance of soft skills and teaches them directly, and this may have been missing from other group work situations. The root cause of the difference between “group work” as participants used the words—usually to indicate group assignments in academic classes—and band remains unclear. It is clear that the students in band would not change the group aspect of this class and that Finn, in orchestra, did want to avoid the group aspects, and eventually succeeded in changing to an independent study in cello for the first semester next year.

Exploration of learning style preference and power reveals that students have little to no control or choice when it comes to information acquisition and learning style in the classroom. Students had no opportunities to test out of activities or units if the student already knew the material. They had no opportunities to use assignment menus. Group work was mandatory except in a few cases where students advocated for other options. Some group work allowed students to play to their strengths when choosing jobs to perform within a group, but this choice did not seem to function as an adequate counter to the great dislike these students had of group work.

Teachers have the power to evaluate student work and assign grades. Our students may not care about their grades at all. In this case, their awareness of grades is ephemeral. Bella reflects, “It was a pretty fun class. I’m pretty sure I had a good grade in it.” Bella valued the fun of the class over the final grade. The activity was self-rewarding, and so intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Our students may care about grades in a limited capacity. They are aware that their parents will impose negative consequences when grades are too low, limiting access to technology or desired activities. Our students are extrinsically motivated to maintain a minimum grade, which seems to have little effect on student actions. Otto, however, was extremely conscious of his grades all the time. He explains,

O: Right now, in Chemistry, I have an A, roughly a medium A in there. It’s just that, I really like that class. I had a lot of background knowledge in chemistry because of the Science Channel, not like in-depth but I knew a lot of the basics. ... I like biology. We did like two units on photosynthesis and chemosynthesis, which were two things that I already knew. ... It’s almost like a pride thing to be, hey, I got this done in one night and I still got an A- on it when other kids were like this took all week for me, and I got a B, middle B, B- on it.

Despite this hyperawareness of his grades, grades have not been an effective way to change his behavior. Neither indifference to grades, nor keen awareness of them change the issue that they do not seem to be effective for changing student behavior toward achievement.

Fulfillment of social contract. “The social contract is an agreement between a community and its ruler that defines and limits the rights of each” (Carroll, 2015, p. 3). In a public education setting, the term ruler becomes amorphous. The ruler in each classroom is the teacher, who is ruled by the principal, superintendent, and any ordinances and laws ranging from the local to the national, along with the governing bodies that established those laws. Regardless of this hierarchy, the teacher is the face of the “ruler,” and the social contract is between the teacher and students.

According to Carroll (2015), for the social contract to be effective, it must have three elements. First, the relationship must be reciprocal. Both the student and the teacher must see each other as individuals and know each other in some sense. Second, mutual obligation must be established. Each must feel that they have rights and obligations to the other in their shared interactions. Third, an exchange of value must occur increasing buy-in and showing respect for the time and effort of the student and the teacher. A functioning social contract gives teachers the power to move beyond information delivery to inducing lasting behavioral change in the student (Carroll, 2015). By implication, a breakdown of the social contract lessens or completely negates this power.

While students in the study didn't directly refer to a social contract, it became apparent that they were highly sensitive to its absence, and that the absence of components of a functioning social contract could contribute to student disengagement from classwork, or school in general. As Finn states, "Everyone in the class, including people who didn't really want to be there, were sort of lumped together. And a lot of the students who really wanted to learn in that class couldn't get, like, special attention." Here the social contract breaks down on two fronts. First, Finn did not feel that she was in a reciprocal relationship because her individual level of achievement and needs were not being met. Second, the level of challenge was not what she needed, so she was exchanging her valuable time and attention for instruction of little value to her. Otto has had similar experiences throughout school.

O: I feel like school's kind of rigid ... with the content. ... All students are held to the same thing. And I get that they're trying to bring you up to that standard, but they don't allow students to really flourish where they're trying to.

Abby mentioned another way in which the social contract could break down.

A: There was one teacher in particular that hated my soul. She probably only hated me because when I get with my friends I am very loud and don't pay attention. She always sat me with my group of friends. So it was like her mistake. ... She would always talk to me about it, and I would be like, "OK. I have to sit there. It's an assigned seat. It's not going to change probably." [I told her that] a couple of times [but she didn't do anything about it].

In a social contract, both parties understand their rights and obligations (Carroll, 2015). In this case, Abby's teacher felt that it was Abby's obligation to be quiet when asked, but she didn't fulfill her obligation to enforce rules with consequences when Abby continued to talk. Abby didn't feel that she could ignore her friends when they were seated together,

and she didn't have the right on her own to change seats. It was her teacher's obligation to make this happen. The social contract broke down because of a disconnect in understanding of responsibilities for behavior regulation between the student and the teacher, and, from Abby's point of view, because the teacher did not fulfill her obligation to help Abby's self-regulation through a change in seats.

Despite the examples above, there are also many times in which the social contract functions as it should for our students. Abby talks about how her relationship with and respect for her band teacher help to motivate her.

A: Throughout the years he [Mr. Starbucks] would get really loud sometimes, but at the end of a concert or one of the competitions that we go to he'd be, like, super proud of us and I was like, this is awesome. ... He took our ... band ... from like this band that plays music because they want to like this band that plays music because they play music!

He has delivered value for value, helping them to reach new levels of musicianship in exchange for their hard work and attention.

Otto finds that when teachers love their subject, it can help build relationships between student and teacher.

O: When they [teachers] are very into the class, they go out of their way to make sure you know something. They go out of their way to make the content more interesting. And sometimes that's not always the responsibility of a teacher. I don't feel like it's something that ... I feel like they should do it, but I don't feel like it's necessarily something that they have to do.

He doesn't view this individualization (something I consider to be part of mutual obligation) as part of a teacher's obligation—implying that he has had a lot of contact with teachers who are not fulfilling this part of the social contract—but he sees how it

helps him. He sees that with a functioning social contract, the teacher is better able to help him, and so he is more likely to change his behavior.

How often in cases of underachievement are the “rulers” the ones failing to fulfill the social contract? Our students are quite cognizant of the fact that they are not holding up their end of the school/student obligation system when they don’t turn in work for whatever reason. But, is the work they are being asked to turn in of value? Is it of equal value to their time, attention, and effort? If the answer is no, it is not the student who is failing to fulfill the social contract, it is the school. In “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” the people were certainly not getting value from their taxes (Andersen, 1949/2017).

Peers. Our students consider themselves to be introverts. They have a small group of good friends that have developed slowly over time, with little to no interest in expanding these groups, though the group may shift over time. Otto has distanced himself from his friends due to some choices they have made with which he is not comfortable. Bella has two separate groups, one from her middle school, from whom she is pulling away, and one from band, to whom she is growing closer. Our students feel comfortable with their groups, unafraid of being judged, confident in their social, emotional, and moral support, though they may keep some of their most precious creations private. The peer group is a source of happiness, confidence, and agency.

Peers outside of these close-knit groups are another matter. The perceived social hierarchy within the school is something our students cannot change, and they don’t feel that they can or want to change themselves so that they will be in the powerful groups within this hierarchy. Otto states,

O: People ... find it more attractive to be popular and not giving it in the school intellectually. I find that a little bit aggravating ... the punk kind of behaviors. ... They will kind of downplay kids who aren't like them, and they will ... taunt. They kind of hold themselves a notch above everybody else around them, ... I associate that with football.

Otto's values do not align with the social structure. He does not want to sacrifice his principles, nor can he change the structure. Therefore, he has little social power amongst his peers. For Finn, this is compounded by her experience of being bullied in elementary school, despite her attempts to fit in by changing her appearance and behavior. For her, it was only when she reached high school and began to follow her own judgements about how she wanted to present herself that she started to find strong friendships and security in her peer interactions, a change that is still ongoing.

Our students are afraid of being judged by peers they don't know well. Finn said, "I feel like when I'm with people who aren't my friends they really hate me and look down on me. So obviously that makes productivity go down." They may experience this fear when asked to present in front of a class, as well.

The interactions with little known peers and the associated fears reflect a perception that others our students' age have more power than they have, particularly power to affect them in a negative way. Peers have the power to increase their social isolation, to take advantage of their abilities, to deny them activities they enjoy and opportunities to learn thoroughly (though some who talked about group work for learning found their peers to be helpful). This disempowerment is facilitated by school supported structures, such as group assignments and presentations in front of the class. (For more

information on how this functions, see literature on leader-member exchange theory, Badshah, 2012) For the most part, they feel powerless to opt out of these situations.

Limbo and judgement. When values, priorities, or even perception of reality is in conflict (as when a student believes their work will only take one hour but a parent believes it will take four), the student is faced with a judgement call. Steve says, “I have been doing good with all of the homework and everything. Sometimes not.” The student must figure out, *Do I trust my judgement or theirs?* Otto discussed this conflict,

O: [My parents] usually can get frustrated [about how I do in school]. They find my method and approach of going to things, they find it different from what they do. And it is different. Both my mom and my dad, they, when they start on something, they get something done, like it’s done. And they set their minds to things. And usually I can get distracted and kind of drawn away from it, and they find that kind of aggravating, and usually I can still get something done. I will spend a little bit of time over here, and a little bit of time over here, and I multitask, even though my parents claim you can’t do that.

If our students choose to follow their own judgment, negative consequences (lower grades, denial of privileges or access to technology, and loss of respect) can be imposed. If they choose to try to conform to the judgement of others, it can erode their confidence in their own abilities and have destructive effects on their psychological well-being (Dweck, 2000; Kim, 2008).

They may also fail in the attempt to follow others’ priorities, spending precious mental energy fighting over and over to believe in another’s judgment. They may also lack necessary skills to fulfill these priorities, having skated on high abilities when organization and time management skills (for instance) were taught to their age mates, but they didn’t learn them because they didn’t need them at the time (Delisle and

Galbraith, 2002). Without these skills, they may be unable to fulfill other's expectations even if they adopt them as their own.

They may try to remain in limbo, not deciding one way or another. Both Finn and Otto showed signs of this. Finn began the year asserting that her attitude about school had changed, that she had realized that she wanted to learn, and that school had the information for her. In her second interview, she told me that this was a fiction she had built for herself, in part trying to be what she perceived her mom to want for her, but that she had realized that she was not like her classmates, and she had to let herself value her creativity and deal with things her own way. Otto maintains that he agrees with his parents' priorities and values, but simply cannot put them into action. This is an untenable position to maintain for long. It seems to require switching from reality to reality based on circumstance. It has led many student participants into lying to parents and to themselves, until the tension between the maintained realities causes the whole thing to fall apart. A choice must eventually be made.

Underachievement as a position of power and assertion of independence/ separateness. The choice to trust their own judgments and priorities over those of others can have negative consequences for our students' grades. If they have chosen to forgo hoop-jumping exercises, they may simply be prioritizing their values and placing a high value on their attention and time, thus becoming Delisle and Galbraith's (2002) selective consumer.

Our students' underachievement can present as a lack: lack of organizational skills, lack of ability to estimate and manage time and task, lack of ability to get started,

lack of ability to work through to a finish point. However, an alternate view is possible. If underachievement is viewed as a choice (deliberate or default), is there a way to see this as a way for our students to assert power and control over their life?

Our students view the home space and time as their own. They attempt to conform to school priorities while at school, fitting themselves into the priorities, expectations, and limits of this space, but when they get home they feel that their obligation to change themselves in this way is over. The change to school self is a concession, a way of saying, *I will use your priorities when I am in your space, but when I am in mine, I will follow my own path.* Framed in this way, homework is an intrusion, impinging on time and space that rightfully belongs to the student self that does not come out at school. While Bella was certainly the most vocal about this feeling, the other students seemed to experience this resentment of time infringement. (Abby seemed to feel it to a lesser degree, with the early established routine and expectation of the kitchen table as a communal homework area.)

Daydreaming and other off-task behavior can also be seen as an assertion of boundaries. Our students, in this case, are not agreeing to follow another's priorities in their own space (even if the space is in the mind). This may be an unconscious decision, with the mind allocating resources to necessary information sorting tasks (Smallwood & Schooler, 2015), or a result of ongoing conflict, filling time until the conflict between two competing priority systems is resolved, eventually allowing our students to act.

While Deslisle and Galbraith (2002) make a clear distinction between the selective consumer and underachiever, I have seen that traits of both combine. Decisions

made from this combined place can look odd from the outside, but these odd choices may be a way that a student in this situation can exert control to make life livable. Take, for instance, this decision of Finn's. In her freshman and sophomore years, two levels of orchestra were offered, and she was placed in the higher one, one of the very few underclassmen to achieve this. In her junior year, the orchestra program had grown big enough that it now consisted of three levels. Again, she was in the top one but had moved down to fourth chair. Competition within the orchestra intensified, and after being moved down two more positions, she decided that it wasn't worth auditioning if there was a chance she wouldn't get into the class she wanted. Neither her mother nor her teacher understood her logic. They felt she should at least try, then drop the class if she didn't succeed.

On the other hand, her decision made sense to her. She was now in control of the situation. The decision was hers, not her teacher's. She didn't need to worry about being judged or having to fight for chair position. The conflict was over, on her terms. She worries that she will regret this decision, but, at the time, it seemed the best option to her. She made the choice that would give her the most agency. Choosing to underachieve may be a way for our students to move from a passive role to an active one in deciding their fate. Though the consequences to their future may be grim, the need to assert personal control in the moment may outweigh the long-term consequences of the future. In failing, our students find power.

Discussion

Patterns of power use emerge in the experiences of the various study participants. Teachers and parents try to reason, persuade, and create connections with our students to influence their behavior. If these techniques don't work, they eventually turn to reward and punishment to get our students to comply. Our students may rebel against any of these influence attempts, and throughout the process, our students underachieve in school. To understand what is happening, it is useful to explore literature on social power, and see how this can give structure and language to power dynamics.

Types of relational power. The Raven (1992) and French framework of the bases of social power provides a taxonomy for looking at the ways teachers and parents exert influence on students. According to this theory, all social power requires at least two people in a relationship, the influencing agent, and the target. The target (in this case, our students) can accept or reject the agent's (teacher's or parent's) attempts to influence his or her behavior, with consequences for either choice. Social power has six bases in this model: coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, informational, and referent.

If our teachers or parents punish a student (placing them on bathroom restrictions or taking away their Xbox, for instance) they are exercising coercive power—imposing a negative consequence for certain behaviors. If this does not bring the desired effect (if, for instance, our students choose to leave a class without permission or refuse to do homework), our students may “win” the power struggle in the moment but face larger consequences later (a phone call home or restriction from all technology). This is not a desirable outcome for our teachers, our parents, or (usually) our students. Overt use of

coercive power can lead to open defiance and negative outcomes for both parties (Rains, 2013; Steindl et al., 2015). Therefore, our teachers and our parents generally try other methods before resorting to coercive power.

Our teachers or parents may also try to use reward power. Helen requires students to place their cell phones in their Chromebook slots in the Chrome cart as they get these computers out at the beginning of each class. She knows that many students don't comply with this rule and instead keep their cell phones. So, she occasionally leaves candy in the slots with cell phones to reward those who do comply with this rule.

Grades can be both coercion and reward, punishing poor performance and noncompliance with a poor grade, and rewarding good performance and compliance with a high grade. Our students (if calm and thinking things through) can evaluate whether the reward or punishment is important to them and reject the attempt at influence if their current behavior is more rewarding. If the grade is important to our students, and this consequence feels immediate enough, it may have the power to change a student's behavior. The ability to evaluate long-term consequences is related to how consequences and the thoughts of them interact with the hot and cool centers of the brain (Mischel, 2014). In the case of our students, grades have not proven to be a good motivator. They may not activate the limbic (hot) system in the brain. Parents and teachers may be attempting to heat the motivational power of the grade when they connect it to immediate coercive or reward consequences.

For both coercive and reward powers, surveillance is important (Raven, 1992, p. 219) and so they require a high level of attention from our teachers or parents, and this

attention must be maintained over time, with the possible consequence of undermining creativity (Collins & Amabile, 1999). If our students are in a rational state of mind (Mischel, 2014) and decide the reward or punishment is not important, they may choose noncompliance. Finally, if they are feeling strong emotions, they may not consider the consequences of choosing noncompliance at all (Mischel, 2014). This, too, has the potential to undermine this power base. So, coercive and reward powers take a lot of effort and may give little result. Nadia talked about how she experiences this in her classroom.

NH: I give them guidelines of when it is appropriate to have it [a cell phone] out and when it is not. I take them away when they have them out during inappropriate times, and that's about all I can do. ... I've tried what Mr. Richardson used to do, give them a treat, like I don't know, I'll do a drawing, and it didn't work very well.

Another obvious form of power our teachers and parents hold is legitimate power—power “based on a structural relationship between the influencing agent and the target” (Raven, 1992, p. 220). In other words, *you have to do what I say because I am the teacher/parent and you are the student*. This type of power can be remarkably effective, as demonstrated in Milgram's (1974) studies of obedience, which showed that up to 65% of participants would obey authority to take actions against their own moral beliefs, depending on study conditions. Obedience seems to be a default position, even when people are in a situation that directly contradicts their own belief systems.

Yet, legitimate power of position seems to me to be like the Emperor's New Clothes. It is sustained by the target's belief. If it is challenged, recourse immediately shifts to other power bases. Picture the young child defying his parent who wants him to

put his shoes on before they go to the park. The child and the parent believe in the parent's legitimate power until ... "I don't wanna!" The child runs down the hall, and the parent may then revert to physical force (lifting the child into a car seat and putting the red shoes on him once he is restrained) or relational pressure—"OK, well, I guess we will leave without you,"—to reassert control, falling back on coercive power in one form or another. In high school, our students may even use the consequences of defying legitimate power to further their goals. Cody described such a situation,

CS: Some students go as far as to try to strike a deal with the teacher where "I won't cause problems if you leave me alone," whereas if you push them on it, they get frustrated. I had a student, not too long ago, I'm sure he intentionally—I don't send very many people to the office, like maybe one a year, maybe two a year. I think he wanted to go to the office. It was over a silly little thing, so I think that is a strategy that you get.

In this case, our students challenged our teachers' legitimate power. Our teachers shifted to coercive power (sending the student to the office). Our students accomplished their short-term goal, getting out of class, and also a longer-term negative, having less chance to learn, and, if this is a behavior repeated over time, likely resulting in lower grades and possible missed opportunities for scholarships or college acceptance.

Legitimate power of position was the first type of legitimate power Raven and French identified in 1959 (Raven, 1992). But there are several other types of legitimate power (identified by Raven in 1992) that come into play in the classroom. One type of legitimate power is reciprocity. This is what that student Cody described above was attempting to use when setting up the dynamic "I won't cause problems if you leave me alone." The target does something valuable for the agent, thus placing the agent in a

position of obligation. Responsibility or dependence is also a legitimate power. This is the flip side of the teacher's and parent's legitimate power. The power of dependence assumes that human beings are obliged to help those who are dependent on them. In this case, the student becomes the agent, dependent on the teacher or parent, who is now the target. The student needs, and the teacher or parent must try to fulfill that need.

Closely related to legitimate power is expert power (Raven, 1992). In this case, the target (student) will do what the agent (teacher/parent) says, because he or she assumes the teacher or parent is an expert. This only works if the target believes that the expert agent is working toward the target's best interest or toward their mutual interest. If the target believes that the agent is working for personal gain at the expense of the target, the target might do exactly the opposite of what the agent wants. Roger described expert power in action,

RS: We go to clinics, they hear the same thing from judges, so they're hearing it from me, yeah, sometimes they hear it from me often, so it's just like, "Yeah, okay, he's just saying whatever again." But then they hear from other people what it's like. "Well, okay, maybe he knows what he's talking about maybe." I don't know. Sometimes hearing it from multiple people make them a little bit more aware of it.

In this case, the outside expert has bolstered Roger's expert power because the students see not only his expertise, but that his input to them was for their mutual benefit (better results in the competition).

Informational power is based on information that a target can provide (Raven, 1992). Our parents attempt to use this power when reminding our students about possible consequences to actions, or when providing organizational tools. Teachers use this power

when coaching students on ways to carry out an activity or when simply conveying curricular content.

The final type of power identified by Raven and French (Raven, 1992) is referent power, in which the target is influenced by the agent because he or she feels that, in some sense, they are the same. Our teachers gain more influence over our students by cultivating their relationship, which can help increase referent power. Our teachers also see how peers can become a positive (or negative) influence through referent power.

Nadia observed,

NH: Since we've leveled the Biology courses, we don't have a lot of those students [students taking the course for the love of the subject] in our regular Bio classes that would be a spark, or even a, someone that other students would look up to and say hey, that's how they're getting by in this class. That's how they're doing well, is they are working hard on this stuff. I have a couple, but not so many as more the other students who want to get everyone off task that are kind of the winners of the classroom, rather than the kid that is doing what they are supposed to. So that I've noticed has been a little challenging for us.

Our teachers have noticed the lack of positive referent power now that classes have been leveled. Referent power plays out at home as well. When our parents acknowledge homework as hoop-jumping, they are attempting to increase their referent power, but are, at the same time, undermining the expert and legitimate power of the teacher.

Power, motivation, and creativity. Power and motivation are two sides of the same coin. Both involve the impetus to take action. Both involve social interaction. Both involve perceived levels of autonomy. Creativity is heavily influenced by context, including attempts to influence motivation (Collins & Amabile, 1999). Table 5 synthesizes research on motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the bases of social power

(Raven, 1992) as they interact with the motivation for compliance with power (Pierro, Cicero, & Raven, 2008), and synergistic versus nonsynergistic extrinsic motivation and their interaction with creativity (Collins & Amabile, 1999).

Table 5

Summary of Research on Motivation: Model Explanation

Amotivation	External Motivation				Internal Motivation
Non-regulation^a No action is taken as there is no impetus to act	External Regulation Action taken to receive reward or avoid punishment	Introjected Regulation Actions taken to avoid guilt or anxiety or to enhance the ego (self-perception)	Identified Regulation Actions taken because they are consciously valued and feel important	Integrated Regulation Actions taken because they are important to who the actor is, but don't bring joy in themselves	Intrinsic Regulation Actions taken because they are their own reward
Desired action not taken; influence attempt has failed*	Hard Power^b (target's perceived freedom is low) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coercive power • Reward power • Legitimate power of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Position ○ Equity ○ Reciprocity 		Soft Power (target's perceived freedom is high) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referent power • Informational power • Legitimate power of dependence 		Social power unnecessary; target takes action on their own
	Nonsynergistic extrinsic motivators^c <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectation of evaluation • Surveillance • Competition • Contingency rewards These are detrimental to creativity.		Synergistic extrinsic motivators <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explanation of expectations • Activities to set a good mood before activities • Immunization against negative effects of external motivators • Evaluative feedback that is informative or constructive (not judging) These assist creativity.**		Intrinsic motivation Can work together with synergistic extrinsic motivators, but inhibited by extrinsic motivators
	Low Autonomy Autonomy			High	

Note. Adapted from “Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being,” by R. M. Ryan and E. L. Deci, 2000, *American Psychologist*, 55(1), pp. 68-78 with permission. ^aRyan & Deci, 2000; ^bPierro, Cicero, & Raven, 2008; ^cCollins & Amabile, 1999
 *Amotivation is not the only possible result of failed influence attempts; **Especially when at stages of the creative process which require persistence and communication with others.

All these theories agree that higher levels of autonomy accompany higher levels of motivation. Reducing someone's autonomy is unlikely to be a successful motivator, and yet, parents, teachers, and even students in this study attempt in various ways to increase motivation by reducing rather than increasing autonomy and freedom. Pierro et al. (2008) has found that a target's desire for control and his or her self-esteem affect how well hard or soft power bases work to influence behavior. These factors also affect which bases of power someone is likely to choose to use. While soft power works better overall, those with a high desire for control are likely to react more negatively to use of hard power. As we saw in chapter five, creative people generally have a high desire for control (Davis, 2003; Feldman, 1999). While both those with low and high self-esteem are likely to respond better to soft power, those with low self-esteem are more likely to choose to use hard power. Our students may have low self-esteem due to their underachievement (Reis & McCoach, 2002b; Rimm, 2003), so soft power is the better choice for motivation. If some of their behaviors challenge the self-esteem of a parent or teacher with personality traits such as resistance to domination and egocentrism (Davis, 2003), that influencer may be more likely to choose hard power.

Tying in the self. Table 5 models some of what may be happening when our students interact with social power of various types, but it doesn't give the full picture. One common reaction our students have to a failed influence attempt is anger, and the desire or determination to do exactly the opposite of what the influencer wanted (as when students refused to do homework because they were reminded). One possible explanation

for this is psychological reactance (Rains, 2013; Steindl, Jones, Traut-Mattausch, & Greenberg, 2015). When

A message inadvertently threatens the freedom of a target audience and creates psychological reactance, which in turn motivates the audience to restore their freedom, through means such as derogating the source (Smith, 1977), adopting a position that is the opposite of what is advocated in the message (Worchel & Brehm, 1970), or perceiving the object or behavior associated with the threatened freedom to be more attractive (Hammock & Brehm, 1966) (Rains, 2013, p. 47).

Reactance is characterized by three components: emotions such as discomfort, hostility, aggression, and anger; behaviors such as complying with the influence, attempts to force the influencing agent to remove the threat, and letting off steam through aggressive behavior; and cognition, including thinking derogatory thoughts about the influencing agent, valuing the threatened freedom more than before the perceived threat, and devaluing the action or value the agent is trying to get the target to adopt (Steindl et al., 2015).

This is a problem, particularly when we take into consideration motivation literature. First of all, emotions such as anger activate the hot system of the brain and shut down rational thought (Mischel, 2014). This means that our students may not be able to think rationally when their freedom feels threatened. Second, to increase motivation, our students must try to integrate presented goals and values into their own (Ryan & Deci, 2000). If our students value the threatened freedom more highly after it comes under perceived threat, this places the threatening goal or behavior farther from their values, making it less likely to be incorporated.

Our parents and our teachers describe choosing hard power when soft power fails to work. They believe that the goals and values they are trying to instill and enforce are for our students' benefit. They believe they are providing support. But support for gifted students may look different than support for neurotypical students. Increasing levels of challenge, allowing for more self-direction, and opportunities to think metacognitively—all supports recommended for gifted students (Kingore, 2013)—may seem out of reach, too complicated for a student who seems to be struggling with what appear to be much easier tasks. Thus, our adults try surveillance and control.

Our students perceive this as a threat to their autonomy and freedom, and an expression of distrust that undermines their feeling of relatedness. Our students then choose self-protective behaviors that feel like a reassertion of control, but that end up undermining their achievement and feelings of competence, and lead to a feeling of helplessness (De Castella et al., 2013). Our students may then have difficulty seeing success in school as an existential possibility, leading to a sense of hopelessness. Factors such as the interaction between a fractured sense of self and memory (Siegel, 2011) cause our students to judge themselves to be helplessly disorganized. Though they believe that they have the tools to change their behavior, this change seems impossible to accomplish, as they (and possibly adults of influence in their life) consider character and work ethic to be the appropriate tools for change, rather than traits that need to be changed through the use of other tools. Cognitive tools, such as “heating” and “cooling” specific actions, and setting limited specific goals (Mischel, 2014), are unknown, and unknowingly unknown, so our study participants don't know to look for them and learn them. Instead, support is

offered in the form of restriction and surveillance, exacerbating the problem. These techniques may induce greater reactance threats to creative individuals than to the general population, as creativity is negatively affected by both.

This tangled interaction is not without a string or two to pull to help unravel it. I will present some possible ways forward in the final chapter.

CHAPTER NINE: SURFACING EXPERIENCE

In this study, I have focused on how individuals experience the underachievement of creatively gifted high school students. In order to do this, I interviewed and observed teachers, parents, and students. I worked with the participants to distil these experiences into anecdotes to help show the how the experiences felt prereflectively and reflectively. I then used these anecdotes, interview transcripts, observation notes, and artifacts as textual data, and ran them through the hermeneutic circle, identifying themes holistically, choosing key statements, rewriting statements with interpretation, and creating reductions around main themes presented from the four phenomenological existentials: lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived human relation. Four overarching themes emerged from this process: creativity, motivation, the student self, and power. I used these themes as a framework to engage in a dialog with existing literature to help bring these aspects of the experience into focus, hoping to “use theory as a foil for examining what it glosses” (van Manen, 2014, p. 66).

These stories opened a doorway into an experience which is both unique to each individual and shared in themes which illuminate what is essential to this experience. These themes tie to broader issues of what it means to learn, to teach, to achieve, to be creative, and to be a student, a parent, or a teacher, in this time, place, and culture. It is my hope that these stories also evoke empathy, understanding, and the feeling that *this is a possible experience for me and mine*.

Themes and Cross Themes

Phenomenology has the power to explore and clarify. A focus on the specifics of experience allows important themes to surface, which may point the way to possible future actions that will affect experience (Criswell, 2013), hopefully for the better. While I presented these theme through anecdotes and then structured them through the metaphor of lens for large emergent themes of experience and filters for the four phenomenological existentials, these lenses and filters are not the only themes present. Rather, they are a way of creating order in the complex tangle of holistic experience.

While the four major themes of creativity, motivation, student self, and power provide a linear structure with which to delve into experience, this study also reveals pervasive ideas that weave across these major themes. These cross themes tend to emerge across chapters and participants within the phenomenological existentials, though they are not bounded by them. The four main cross themes are priorities, transitions and contexts, emotions, and important others and the anyone.

I will revisit the themes and present the cross themes not to summarize findings, but to review elements that led me to make the recommendations that follow.

Creativity. In Chapter 5, all participants discussed how time-consuming creative activities are. Time is a limited resource, so participants were faced with a choice of how much time to spend on creative activities, and how much to spend on other things. This was a difficult decision for all participants, and they often came to different conclusions about what to prioritize, which created conflict. Our students found that some places and conditions were supportive of creativity, including spaces and people who welcomed and

valued creativity, places that felt emotionally safe, places where privacy and solitude were available, and places and activities of high autonomy and confidence. Places and conditions hostile to creativity included those in which success didn't seem possible, when our students felt exposed to the judgement of teachers, parents, and peers, when they felt they had to compete with others, when they had low autonomy, and generally when they felt monitored. Places were rarely completely hostile or completely friendly. Our students found that creativity was viewed across a range of valuation (from hostility to various levels of support, see p. 173), and that a single person (such as a teacher or parent) could move from one level of valuation to another, depending on circumstances.

Motivation. In Chapter 6, I made a distinction between motivation—the student's ability to initiate, continue, and complete tasks—and power—when an important other attempts to influence a student to do something. Our students said that finding motivation for some tasks (particularly creative tasks) was easy, while finding motivation for others (particularly assigned homework on skills they had already mastered) was difficult. In general, if our students felt that a task was enjoyable (intrinsically motivating) or was of some value to them, even if they didn't enjoy the process (such as work which clarified understanding and helped with learning) it was easier to initiate and persevere than when they felt they needed to complete a task only for the reward of a grade or the avoidance of a bad grade or lost privileges. If they believed that they could successfully accomplish a task, motivation was also easier to find.

Our parents, and to some extent our teachers, felt that our students lack motivation and a sense of how to prioritize, so they attempted to help. If they helped by

adding structure, monitoring, or restricting student activity choices, it often backfired. Our students also felt they lacked the ability to get motivated in general, berating themselves for their low motivation for assigned tasks and ignoring the regular high motivation they summoned for activities such as self-directed creative practice or project, including research of various kinds into interest areas. All participants felt that what students needed was an act of will to just fix the problem. No students or parents seemed aware of specific techniques to help with motivation. Fearing failure and having no tools to reverse their underachievement, our students engaged in deflective strategies which served to further undermine their achievement and agency.

Student Self. In looking at the student self, our participants felt that the self was both permanent and changing, inherent and context dependent. All participants had a fairly congruent view of what they considered to be the unchanging aspects of our students' selves: creative, smart, disorganized, and a slacker or possessed of a poor work ethic. Students and parents saw our student was also sensitive, stubborn and introverted. Students and teachers viewed our students as perfectionists. Teachers and parents saw that our students had low self-confidence, and that they were dishonest. Our parents still believed that our students were good people. Our students felt invisible.

Within phenomenology, the self is considered to be context dependent. Our students showed a pattern of (mostly) working well in class and completing little to no school-related work at home. They shifted self from context to context, and with these shifting selves came different memories, priorities, and available skills. These selves were valued differently by important people in their lives, and some of these selves felt

more like “the real me” to our students than others. Alignment with “the real me” occurred in contexts where our students were able to act within their own existential possibilities. Our students were otherwise performing social roles outside of their felt existential possibilities in other contexts, failing to be drawn into the world. Necessary information, skills, equipment, and memory were not available. When our students felt their existential possibilities disappear, they no longer knew who or how to be, approaching an annihilation of the self.

Power. In Chapter 8, I used Raven (1992) and French’s bases of social power to discuss the various types of power (coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, informational, and referent) participants used and in what contexts. Pierro et al (2008) group these powers into categories of hard (coercive, reward, and most types of legitimate) and soft (referent, informational, and legitimate power of dependence). Parents and teachers usually attempted to use soft power types to influence students to improve achievement. Our teachers found this to be particularly effective when using referent power to build a sense of connection and care with a student. However, when soft power didn’t work and students continued to underachieve, or when emotions ran hot, parents and teachers would begin to use hard types of power. This could trigger reactance, when students felt a threat to their sense of self, and so rebelled in various ways against the influence attempt (Rains, 2013; Steindl et al., 2015). It became clear that parent and teacher influence on our students to improve achievement was limited by how much our students embraced their values and goals, as well as whether they had the skills to convert these goals into motivation and action. Many times, attempts to support our students through increased

structure, or protect them from larger long term negative consequences by imposing smaller, immediate negative consequences (like taking away a cell phone) just made our students feel their lack of agency, lowering their ability to find motivation. They felt guilt, shame, anger, and helplessness.

Priorities. The cross theme of priorities surfaced most often in the lived time sections of the various chapters. Time is a limited resource, and so our participants had to decide what to spend their time on, and what must be postponed or abandoned. This involves prioritization. Teachers faced choices about whether to teach time consuming, open ended curricula allowing for creativity, failure, and experimentation, or to teach structured, step by step processes that would increase the chances of arrival at a correct answer. Most of our teachers chose a blend of the two, and felt that the pressure of outside groups such as departments, administration, school board, and state and national laws pressured them to choose the latter over the former in order to cover a larger amount of curricular content (see also the lived relationships portions of Chapters 5-8).

Our teachers often felt they were choosing between learning and achievement, and that this choice harmed students. This also made grades seem meaningless and arbitrary, increasing the chances that students would focus on getting points instead of learning material. Some felt that, while it was important to teach soft skills such as organization, time management, and planning, students were expected to have these skills in place before arriving at high school, teacher preparation programs did not show them how to teach these skills, and taking time to teach soft skills could mean failure to get

through curricula. Others felt that soft skills were the foundation of success, and prioritized them above curricular content.

Priorities are relational as well as time dependent, so some issues of prioritization are discussed most extensively in the lived relationship sections of Chapters 5-8. Parents and students often held different priorities. Part of this was due to different perceptions of time. Our parents felt that our students never budgeted enough time to complete assignments and do them well. Our students admitted that they regularly procrastinated, but some felt that certain assignments were unimportant, and others felt that procrastination had a motivational benefit. DeCastella et al (2013) consider procrastination a deflection strategy called self-handicapping, which give a student an excuse for failure that doesn't impinge on sense of self in the short term, though it can have long term negative effects on both achievement and self-image.

Our students wanted to please their parents and be viewed as "good," so many tried to adopt parental values, priorities, and goals. But, though the self is context dependent, it is not infinitely adaptable (Hudson & Fraley, 2015). Our students were only able to perform the social role of adopting parental values and priorities, without these priorities becoming true existential possibilities. Our students found themselves suspended between two priority lists, their parents' and their own, unable to fulfill either well. This sometimes led to paralysis and feelings of existential threat, sometimes to our students forging their own path as they followed their own values, and sometimes to a growing adoption of some, but not all, parental priorities as age and the looming world after graduation added relevance to previously irrelevant-seeming tasks.

Transitions and contexts. As mentioned above, phenomenology maintains that the self is different in different contexts. Siegel (2011) says that one developmental task in adolescence is to get these selves to work together, and also to accept the multifaceted nature of the self. Bella, in particular among study participants, felt the differences in her self in different contexts. Finn felt her difference from her peers when she felt she had to “reprogram my brain for the day” when asked to switch tasks, something she felt her peers did easily. Whether the experience of transitions and context dependent self was more extreme for our students than for their peers or not, it was clearly a source of difficulty for them (see the lived space sections of Chapters 5-8).

Our parents and teachers seemed either unaware of this difficulty, or unsure what to do about it. Our teachers did post daily agendas in their rooms, and allowed some wait time for transitions between activities, but most classes were structured to break up the class block. This has been presented to our teachers as a best practice in teacher training and professional development, but I question its interaction with Csikszentmihalyi’s (2008) research into flow. All student participants described experiencing flow in one way or another, enjoying the challenge and full immersion of attention it afforded. Instead of having opportunities at school to experience flow, our students were asked to transition from one place to another, one task to another, one social situation to another, over and over throughout the day. They had no control over these transitions, and so hurtled from self to self, gaining and losing aptitudes and outlooks, attempting to fit the social roles demanded in each situation. For students who had such a fragile sense of self, I think this was a largely unacknowledged and unrelenting stressor of school.

Emotions. Emotions are felt in the body, so this cross theme emerged most strongly in the lived body sections of Chapters 5-8, but it flows into all of the experiences of all of the study participants. Underachievement is an emotionally charged experience. At various times all study participants felt love, helplessness, hopelessness, worry, frustration, confusion, anxiety, anger, fear, exhaustion, and joy. These emotions changed participant relationships with each other, as well as the actions they took for self-protection and in attempts to help or shield each other. They even changed thought patterns and memory. They shaped action, inaction, and reaction. Every theme and experience in the study was shaped by emotion, and helped to shape emotions that followed. Alleviating the problem of underachievement for creative high school students is not separable from the people involved, the emotions they feel, and the ways that they manifest and are affected by these emotions, so issues of self-regulation and metacognition must be addressed.

Important others and the anyone. Rimm (2003) points out that attitudes of important others affect underachievement. This study supports that finding, particularly when looking at the lived relationship sections. Katie pointed out that a teacher could make or break a year for Bella. Our students felt and feared the judgement of their peers, sometimes wishing to be more like them, sometimes taking pride in their differences.

It became clear throughout the study that individual relationships with teachers are important, but tended to be fleeting, except in a few cases. Even peer relationships and judgements changed. Far more important was the relationship between our students and our parents, which endures. Our students may have spent more hours with teachers

than they did with their families, but not with any individual teacher, and by high school, they had multiple teachers each day, and changed teachers every year, if not every semester, even within a subject. “Schools can account for as much as 25% of the variance contributing to student achievement” (Gallagher, 2004, p. 122). Relationships with teachers come and go; relationships with friends and peers shift and change as they fall into and out of each other’s lives; relationships with parents last. This is important not for issues of responsibility or blame, but simply to help develop an understanding of the limits of influence that a school, or any one teacher, has.

For relationships to function, they need a foundation of trust. Our students and their important others built this trust on common experiences, the meeting of each other’s needs, feelings of similarities between them, trust in each other’s judgement and values, and mutual reciprocal care. This trust started to break down under the stress of underachievement. When important others appeared to value activities they framed as hoop-jumping (useless except to earn points and prove compliance) over activities and accomplishments that our students found more meaningful, motivating, and valuable, this exacerbated our students’ feelings of difference and fragile self. Structure given by teachers and parents felt threatening, and our students became vague or lied outright in order to gain space to pursue their own interests and goals, and to buy time to recuperate from the battering cacophony of people at school. Teachers saw our students cheat, parents and teachers caught our students lying, and our students even lied to themselves.

In Chapter 7, I briefly mentioned how “the anyone”—the cultural context that influences the norms that guide people in ways of being and meaningfulness (Kaufer &

Chemero, 2015)—shapes existential possibilities in context. The influence of the anyone was apparent in every aspect of this study, from how our students valued (or devalued) their own interests (Chapter 5), found ease or difficulty with motivation (Chapter 6), what possibilities they saw for who they were and who they felt they should be (Chapters 4 and 7), and the ways in which they carved out space and time for themselves, complying or resisting influence attempts from others (Chapter 8). Our teachers experienced the influence of the anyone when choosing and implementing curricular choices, time allocation, and pedagogy. Our parents felt the anyone in changes in schooling from when they were in high school, in goals and dreams they had for their children, and in the worry and fear they felt when thinking about our students' futures. Underachievement of creatively gifted students takes place in a world of relationships, and cannot be separated from them.

Recommendations

Thankfully, themes of difficulty were not the only thing to surface from studying the experience of creative underachievement. Reviewing literature on emergent themes from the study suggests some actions that may help. In light of these findings, I make the following recommendations to the study site.

Establish a parent support group. Our parents are in pain and feel bewildered, helpless, and isolated. However, the commonality of their experiences demonstrates that they are not truly alone. Others have had similar experiences. Forming a guided group could provide much needed community and an opportunity to improve the situation. I suggest that this group be led by a team of two: one teacher with expertise in the

characteristics and needs of gifted students, especially creatively gifted students, and one psychologist or counselor with expertise in family counseling and self-regulation techniques. This group would ideally provide:

- Emotional support for parents
- Information about characteristics and needs of gifted adolescents
- Information about needs of creative people
- Information about potential creative careers and the importance of creativity
- Information about self-regulation
- Support for possible changes in communication within the families

Rimm (2003) emphasizes the importance of “changing the expectations of important others” and “modifications of reinforcements at home and school” when attempting to reverse underachievement (p. 432). Baum et al. (1995) also identify positive relationships with adults and self-regulation as important for reversing underachievement. I believe that establishing the proposed support group would help address these needs.

Review grading policies. Throughout the study, with every participant group and looking through each lens, grades emerge again and again as a huge problem. Teachers feel confusion about what grades mean or should mean, and they believe this confusion extends to parents, students, and colleges. Data dialogs and department-wide assessment have not clarified the issue. Teachers worry that systemic achievement pressure has pulled focus from learning and shifted it to achievement, and that measures used to determine achievement either do not measure what they are intended to, or measure only part of it.

I recommend that the school devote some of its professional development time to a dialog about grading practices. Several questions need to be addressed.

- How do current grading practices impact student and teacher focus?
- Is this impact productive, counterproductive, or both, and what can be done to improve the situation?
- What do we want our grades to reflect?
- What do we want our grades to communicate?
- Who is our target audience for this communication? If there are multiple targets (students, teachers, parents, colleges, apprenticeship programs, etc.) do there need to be multiple measures to establish clear communication, and what should these measures be?
- What changes in teaching practices need to accompany changes in grading practices?

This review would be time consuming, but I believe it would also help the school community to better serve students and move toward a grading-for-learning culture (Kingore, 2013; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). This discussion might need support in the form of training in differentiation (including the needs of different student populations) and training in soft-skill and self-regulation instruction (Kingore, 2013; Mischelle, 2014; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013), as well as information about the benefits of homogenous grouping for all students (Collins & Gan, 2013; Ding & Lehrer, 2007).

Student support group. Student study participants felt isolated, helpless, and odd. Like parents, they need information about what it means to be gifted, and what this means for them in this context (Olenchak, 2009), as well as direct instruction in self-regulation and self-advocacy (Kingore, 2013; Mischelle, 2014). This group would ideally provide:

- Emotional support for students
- Information about characteristics and needs of gifted adolescents
- Information about needs of creative people
- Information about potential creative careers and the importance of creativity
- Information on and training in self-regulation
- Support for possible improvement in communication within families and teachers

- Training in self-advocacy
- Access to ability-peers

Autonomy, competency, and relatedness support higher levels of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A support group like this could help raise autonomy by providing information that would help students to better understand themselves and why they may or may not fit into the existing school system (Olenchak, 2009), as well as strategies students could use to cope with these differences to better meet their own needs (Baum et al., 1995). It would raise competency by providing information and techniques for self-regulation (Mischel, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and a sense that their strengths are valuable not only to themselves but to future employers and the world (Amabile et al., 2005; Collins & Amabile, 1999). Finally, it would raise relatedness by helping students know that there are others like them (Rogers, 2007), and that they are supported by their peers and by the school.

Expand and improve gifted programming. Many teachers and parents discussed their worries that school expectations have become too advanced and complex since their time in high school. Some parents discouraged their children from taking advanced classes or getting identified as gifted, while others expressed dissatisfaction with implementation of gifted programming in primary and middle school. Some teachers were overtly skeptical about leveled classes. Some students felt that intelligence is not considered “cool” at the study site. Rimm (2003) lists anti-intellectual and antigifted school atmospheres as risk factors for underachievement. While I would hesitate to call

this site antigifted without further targeted research to assess this, gifted programming at this high school exhibits room for improvement.

An established gifted program could provide several benefits to the school community and specifically to underachieving creative students. A gifted specialist at the school could provide teachers with training on gifted needs and behaviors and what to do about them, on the benefits of grouping and leveled instruction for all learners and how to implement this, and even provide one-on-one support for differentiated curriculum development and implementation. This person could run support groups such as those proposed above to help students and their families directly. Perhaps most importantly, a gifted program at the high school, with the implementation of the schoolwide enrichment model (Renzulli & Reis, 2003) or other programming, could provide opportunities for extended learning to students, potentially raising their overall level of engagement in school, as well as helping them make cross-curricular connections and explore career opportunities.

Renzulli's schoolwide enrichment model (Renzulli & Reis, 2003) has shown great promise in reversing underachievement and increasing overall engagement in school while providing time for students to explore their creative and productive interests in a supported autonomous atmosphere (Baum et al., 1995). Teachers use curriculum compacting to allow students to earn time to work (usually with a gifted specialist) on self-driven projects (Renzulli & Reis, 2003). Programming like this, with high support for student autonomy and creativity, and a proven track record for reversing underachievement and meeting needs of exceptional students, could open up great

opportunities for students, and dovetail nicely into Colorado's new graduation menu, which includes capstone projects as a viable demonstration of learning (CDE, 2017). This makes it a potential good match for the study site.

The above recommendations provide a variety of potential solutions requiring different levels of resource commitment from the district and could be implemented together or individually. The underachievement of creatively gifted high school students is a complex problem, and the recommendations I have made address only a few of the issues that surfaced through this study's attempt to understand this experience.

The questions raised by this study about power-dynamics, gifted programming, student needs, and communication, among others, require further study. They are an open and evolving question that will continue to change as context and culture change. Phenomenology cannot answer all these questions, but it can remind us to stay open, to continue challenging assumptions, and to promote dialog with those whose different points of view can widen our perspectives, so that we dig deep in the search for understanding and empathy.

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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Student Interview One

Hi, I am Jennie Mizrahi (everyone calls me Ms Miz). Did you get a chance to read the assent letter when you signed it? Do you have any questions for me before we get started? If any of the questions make you uncomfortable, you don't have to answer them. This is all about finding out what your experiences are like, so there are no wrong answers. I am not assigning blame or trying to find out who did what wrong, I just want to hear about what you have seen, heard, felt, and experienced with regards to creativity and school in order to understand it better. I am going to record everything, so that I get what you say correct, and at the end of the study, I will show you everything I wrote from your interviews and experience, so you can tell me if I need to change anything to get it right.

1. So, tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What do you like to do for fun?
3. What kind of activities do you do that are creative? Can you tell me about that?
 - a. If student is unable to come up with a creative activity or product, offer suggestions based on answers to question two: Do you skateboard (or sing, or code programs, etc.)? Can you tell me about that?
4. What has school been like for you?
5. Do you remember a time when you liked school? Can you tell me about that?
6. Is there anything you like about school now?
7. (If there is a change in attitude/experience) What changed?

8. What would make school better for you?
9. Have you had classes in (creativity process/product)?
 - a. (If yes) Tell me about that.
 - b. (If no) Do you think there should be classes in (student creative activity/product)?
 - i. What would that look like?
10. What do your parents think of how you do in school?
11. What do your parents think of your (creative activity/product)?
12. How do you see your teachers?
13. How do your teachers see you?
14. Do your teachers know about your (creative activity/product)?
15. Do your friends know about your (creative activity/product)? Do they also (creative activity/product)?
16. Does your creativity have anything to do with how you experience school? How so?

Possible follow up questions:

1. Can you think of a specific time/incidence of that?
2. Can you describe that in more detail?
3. And what was that like?
4. What did that look/feel/smell/sound/taste like?
5. Can you be more specific?
6. Tell me more about that.

Thanks for talking to me today. It was really helpful. Here is the journal that was mentioned in the assent letter. Try to spend at least 15 minutes a week writing about your experiences in school or in your creative endeavors. If you want to write more, feel free. Do you need me to send you a reminder to write?

We also need to set up a way for me to look at your creativity sometime this month or in October. How would you like to do that?

Student Interview Two

Thanks for meeting with me again.

1. How have things been going since we last talked?
2. What did you discover by keeping the journal? Is there anything you want to talk about from that?
3. Did you find that keeping a journal changed your experiences at all, or how you thought about them?
4. What have you been doing creatively since I last saw you?
 - a. How has that been going?
 - b. Did you have a chance to incorporate that into school in any way?
5. Questions specific to creative activity/product such as:
 - a. Can you tell me more about what you feel like when you are (creative activity)?
 - b. What do you think about when you are (creative activity)?
 - c. Is there anything specific you need in order to (creative activity)?
 - i. Is there a specific spot or equipment?

- ii. Do you need music or quiet?
- d. What derails you when you are (creative activity)?
- 6. What has school been like for you this year?
- 7. Has anything changed with how you see yourself in the school?
- 8. Has anything changed with how your parents see you?
- 9. Has anything changed with how your teachers see you?
- 10. Have there been any changes with friends?

Possible follow up questions:

- 1. Can you think of a specific time/incidence of that?
- 2. Can you describe that in more detail?
- 3. And what was that like?
- 4. What did that look/feel/smell/sound/taste like?
- 5. Can you be more specific?
- 6. Tell me more about that.

Teacher Interview

Hi, I am Jennie Mizrahi. Did you get a chance to read the permission letter when you signed it? Do you have any questions for me before we get started? If any of the questions make you uncomfortable, you don't have to answer them. This is all about finding out what your experiences are like, so there are no wrong answers. I am not assigning blame or trying to find out who did what wrong, I just want to hear about what you have seen, heard, felt, and experienced with regards to creatively gifted students underachieving in school in order to understand it better. I am going to record everything,

so that I get what you say correct, and at the end of the study, I will show you everything I wrote from your interview, so you can tell me if I need to change anything to get it right.

1. So, tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What do you like to do for fun?
3. Do you consider yourself to be creative?
4. What kind of activities do you do that are creative? Can you tell me about that?
 - a. If teacher is unable to come up with a creative activity or product, offer suggestions based on answers to question two: do you sing, or code programs, etc. Can you tell me about that?
 - b. Do you consider teaching to be creative? Can you tell me about that?
5. Do you incorporate creativity into your classroom? How so?
6. What is it like for you when you work with creative students?
 - a. What are the positives?
 - b. What are the negatives?
 - c. What do you see, hear, think, feel?
 - d. What do you do?
7. What is teaching about for you?
8. Can you tell me about working with underachieving students?
 - a. What is that like for you?
 - i. What do you find yourself seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling?
 - ii. What do you do?

- b. What is it like interacting with their parents?
9. How do you see your creative underachievers?
 10. How do you think they see you?
 11. How do you think their parents see you?
 12. Do your students know about your (creative activity/product)?
 13. Does your creativity have anything to do with how you experience teaching? How so?

Possible follow up questions:

1. Can you think of a specific time/incidence of that?
2. Can you describe that in more detail?
3. And what was that like?
4. What did that look/feel/smell/sound/taste like?
5. Can you be more specific?
6. Tell me more about that.

Parent Interview

Hi, I am Jennie Mizrahi. Did you get a chance to read the consent letter when you signed it? Do you have any questions for me before we get started? If any of the questions make you uncomfortable, you don't have to answer them. This is all about finding out what your experiences are like, so there are no wrong answers. I am not assigning blame or trying to find out who did what wrong, I just want to hear about what you have seen, heard, felt, and experienced with regards to creativity and school in order to understand it better. I am going to record everything, so that I get what you say correct,

and at the end of the study, I will show you everything I wrote from your interview, so you can tell me if I need to change anything to get it right.

1. So, tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What do you like to do for fun?
3. What kind of activities do you do that are creative? Can you tell me about that?
 - a. If parent is unable to come up with a creative activity or product, offer suggestions based on answers to question two: do you do anything creative in your work (or sing, or code programs, etc.) Can you tell me about that?
 - b. Does your child participate in this?
4. What has your child's schooling been like for you?
5. Do you remember a time when he/she liked or did well in school? Can you tell me about that?
6. How is he/she doing in school now? Can you tell me about that?
7. (If there is a change in attitude/experience/school performance) What changed?
8. How do your child's friends affect his/her experience of school?
9. What would make school better for you and him/her?
10. What do you do to support your child's school experience?
11. How does the school support (or fail to support) your child's creative strengths?
12. What do you think of your child's (creative activity/product)?
13. How do you see your child's teachers?
14. How do you think the teachers see him/her?

15. How do you think the school sees you?

Possible follow up questions:

1. Can you think of a specific time/incidence of that?
2. Can you describe that in more detail?
3. And what was that like?
4. What did that look/feel/smell/sound/taste like?
5. Can you be more specific?
6. Tell me more about that.

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAILS

Student and Parent Recruitment

University of Denver

Dear [insert parent/guardian name(s)]

This year, our district is working with Jennie Mizrahi, a student from the Mogridge Department of Education at the University of Denver, to conduct a study about the underachievement of creatively gifted students. By doing this research we hope to learn about how these students, their parents, and their teachers experience school in order to generate recommendations for ways of changing school programming and procedures to better meet the needs of these students.

If you feel that your child fits the following criteria, you and your child may wish to participate in the study:

Creatively Gifted: Creatively gifted students tend to be able to view problems from multiple points of view and generate multiple solutions to problems (both of which may inhibit the ability to do well on standardized tests), they tend to have extreme focus about ideas/activities that interest them, and may ignore other things (like assignments). They may misinterpret directions. They may also have a strong sense of humor. You may know of terrific activities they are working on in their own time. Remember that creativity extends beyond the arts to originality in any activity, including math, science, language arts, computer programming, or even skateboarding. Many of these students are not officially identified as gifted, though some may be.

Underachievement: This is when a student seems to work below his/her ability level. These are the students who may be disengaged from class, complain about being bored or how the class content or school in general will never be useful. They may also be doing good work but seem too disorganized to turn it in. They may help others in class but fail to complete their own work. In general, they demonstrate low performance but high ability.

Participation:

If you choose to allow your child to participate and s/he is chosen for the study, s/he will be asked to give two interviews, keep a journal, and provide an example of his/her creative activitie(s). You yourself will also be asked to participate in one interview. The interviews will be audio-recorded for accuracy. Near the end of the study, each participant (child and parent/guardian) will have a chance to review and give input on the part of the study that is based on their own interview(s) and other information, and the

names of all participants will be changed in order to protect their identities in the final study.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. To volunteer to participate, please contact Jennie Mizrahi at [REDACTED] with your name, your child's name, your child's area(s) of creativity, and your preferred contact information. If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions or contact Ms. Mizrahi at [REDACTED] at any time. You may also contact Dr. [REDACTED], who will be overseeing this research as faculty advisor, at [REDACTED], or at [REDACTED]

If you have any questions or concerns about your research participation or rights as a participant, you may contact the DU Human Research Protections Program by emailing [REDACTED] or calling [REDACTED] to speak to someone other than the researchers.

Thank you so much,

[REDACTED], Director of Instruction

Teacher Recruitment

University of Denver

Dear [insert teacher name]

This year, our district is working with Jennie Mizrahi, a student from the Mogridge Department of Education at the University of Denver, to conduct a study about the underachievement of creatively gifted students. By doing this research we hope to learn about how these students, their parents, and their teachers experience school in order to generate recommendations for ways of changing school programming and procedures to better meet the needs of these students. Your status as a teacher at Windsor High School makes you eligible to participate in this study.

Participation:

If you choose to participate and are chosen for the study, you will be asked to give one interview, and allow the researcher to observe one class period in your classroom. The interview will be audio-recorded for accuracy, and notes will be taken during the observation. Near the end of the study, you will have a chance to review and give input on the part of the study that is based on your interview and observation, and the names of all participants will be changed in order to protect their identities in the final study.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. To volunteer to participate, please contact Jennie Mizrahi at [REDACTED] with your name, the subject you teach, and your preferred contact information. If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions or contact Ms. Mizrahi at [REDACTED] at any time. You may also contact Dr. [REDACTED], who will be overseeing this research as faculty advisor, at [REDACTED], or at [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns about your research participation or rights as a participant, you may contact the DU Human Research Protections Program by emailing [REDACTED] or calling [REDACTED] to speak to someone other than the researchers.

Thank you so much,

[REDACTED], Principal

