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# Underachieving Profoundly Gifted Adolescents

## Abstract

Underachieving Profoundly Gifted Adolescents is a phenomenological study that explores the lived experiences of five underachieving profoundly gifted adolescents. Profoundly gifted individuals are those whose IQ scores are at the 99.9th percentile. This study was a means to explore factors that contribute to underachievement among this subpopulation of gifted students. In-depth interviews with young adults provided insight into the personal experiences of underachievement in profoundly gifted adolescents. Parents also took part in interviews to provide an additional perspective on the underachievement experience. Findings indicated five themes that contribute to underachievement among this population. Expectations were a major contributor to underachievement. In addition to expectations, social issues, mental health issues, rebellion, and motivation also emerged as contributing to underachievement in profoundly gifted individuals. All five of these contributing factors; expectations, social issues, mental health issues, rebellion, and motivation are interrelated and synergistic.

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UNDERACHIEVING PROFOUNDLY GIFTED ADOLESCENTS

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A Dissertation in Practice

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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by

Marisa Soto Harrison

June 2020

Advisor: Norma L. Hafenstein, PhD

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Title: UNDERACHIEVING PROFOUNDLY GIFTED ADOLESCENTS

Advisor: Norma L. Hafenstein, PhD

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### **Abstract**

Underachieving Profoundly Gifted Adolescents is a phenomenological study that explores the lived experiences of five underachieving profoundly gifted adolescents. Profoundly gifted individuals are those whose IQ scores are at the 99.9th percentile. This study was a means to explore factors that contribute to underachievement among this subpopulation of gifted students. In-depth interviews with young adults provided insight into the personal experiences of underachievement in profoundly gifted adolescents. Parents also took part in interviews to provide an additional perspective on the underachievement experience. Findings indicated five themes that contribute to underachievement among this population. Expectations were a major contributor to underachievement. In addition to expectations, social issues, mental health issues, rebellion, and motivation also emerged as contributing to underachievement in profoundly gifted individuals. All five of these contributing factors; expectations, social issues, mental health issues, rebellion, and motivation are interrelated and synergistic.

*Keywords: gifted, profoundly gifted, underachievement, mental health issues, expectations, social issues, rebellion, motivation*

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The stories of profoundly gifted adolescents can provide insight into the patterns that cause members of this population to underachieve. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the contributing factors to underachievement among profoundly gifted adolescents. The experiences shared through interviews showed the patterns that indicate some of the perplexing behaviors of this population. There is a lack of information on this phenomenon from this subgroup of the gifted population. This study sought to provide the information necessary for parents, educators, and psychologists to support the academic and social-emotional needs of profoundly gifted adolescents.

Typical gifted individuals score in the top two percent (98th percentile) on an IQ measure. According to the Davidson Institute for Talent Development,

Profoundly gifted individuals score in the 99.9th percentile on IQ tests and have an exceptionally high level of intellectual prowess. These students score at least three standard deviations above the norm on the bell curve, so they are at the extreme end of the intelligence, or IQ, continuum. (Davidson Institute, n.d.).

Identifying a sufficient sample of profoundly gifted individuals presents a significant practical obstacle to the collection of the research data. Few educational institutions in the United States provide specialized education for profoundly gifted students. One such institution, the Davidson Academy, is a public school integrated with the University of Nevada. The primary mission of the Davidson Academy is the education of profoundly gifted students. This researcher has a personal network of contacts at the Davidson

Academy as well as the Davidson Institute for Talent Development, an organization that assists profoundly gifted children and their parents. This network of profoundly gifted students provides a unique pool of research participants for an otherwise elusive population. The community partner for this study was a counselor from the Davidson Academy who supports the need for more research on this subpopulation of gifted students.

### **Background of the Researcher**

I have had a long and varied educational journey. I do not remember much before third grade; however, the year I entered third grade was a memorable one. My family moved from San Diego, California, to San Jose, Costa Rica, where I attended an international school. I still remember several of the activities we did that year. I loved going to school. When I returned to the United States for fourth grade, everything changed. I spent the entire year bored because of the mediocre educational environment in which I found myself. Having learned most of the material taught that year, I was completely unchallenged in fourth grade. We moved a lot while I was growing up; if we stayed somewhere for a full 2 years, I was lucky. The frequent moves made it a challenge for me to connect with peers and teachers, something I did not do until I reached high school. Over the years, my early educational experiences have caused me to understand and empathize with students who feel underchallenged and bored with school. Further, these experiences have had an impact on how I view school as a parent and an educator.

During high school, I had two phenomenal teachers in the small, rural town in the state of Arkansas where we lived. I had moved there from Miami, Florida, where I had attended an enormous high school. The caring teachers in my new environment impacted

me. The school was small, the teachers took the time to connect with students, and the educators cared about students' success not just academically, but personally, as well. My history teacher that year stood out from all the others. He challenged me, which to me was new, exhilarating, and satisfying. With that experience, my teacher had reignited my desire to learn.

After graduating from high school early, I took some time off before starting at the local university. At 17 years of age, I began college at the University of North Florida. I was young and not sure what I wanted to study, and as a result, I felt unmotivated. I had mediocre grades and made mediocre efforts, essentially coasting through my first 2 years of college. I decided to take a break from formal schooling and traveled to Europe with some of my friends, which was an amazing experience, both personally and educationally. After I returned to the university, I felt that I needed a change. I decided to transfer to the University of Central Florida to complete the remainder of my bachelor's degree in liberal arts. Still, I was not sure what I wanted to do.

After more than 20 years of working and being a parent, I decided to return to school to get my Master's degree. For years, I had been teaching in private school settings, beginning in Costa Rica a few years after completing my bachelor's degree. I enjoyed teaching; however, I had not taken the necessary coursework to apply for licensure. I enrolled in a Master of Education in Special Education program in 2010. Through my studies, I learned more about twice-exceptional students and quickly knew that was the area on which I wanted to focus.

After teaching gifted and talented students for 3 years, I decided to leave my position and move back to the U.S. East Coast to open a school for gifted students with a fellow parent of a profoundly gifted child. Because of the limited options we had when raising our children, we had to make some hard choices. Our family had moved out West so that our child could attend a special program for like-minded students. When both of our children finished school, we discussed the need for educational options for gifted students in our community. The school was the vision of two mothers of profoundly gifted students who struggled to find educational solutions for their children. The school opened in 2014.

This study is important to me because of the personal experiences I have had with this phenomenon. I have two profoundly gifted children. Despite appropriate educational placements, they both have struggled with underachievement throughout adolescence. I have seen the phenomenon of underachieving gifted students several times within the profoundly gifted community. These individuals, with seemingly bright futures, develop destructive patterns of behavior that unfortunately cause both short- and long-term negative outcomes.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although there are numerous studies on underachievement among moderately gifted individuals, there are few studies (Grobman, 2006, 2009) on underachievement in the profoundly gifted population. Exceptionally gifted individuals (those with IQs at the 99.9th percentile) comprise a small portion of the overall gifted population, and there has been little research on this population. Studies on the development of the profoundly gifted exist; however, few researchers have examined underachievement and the factors

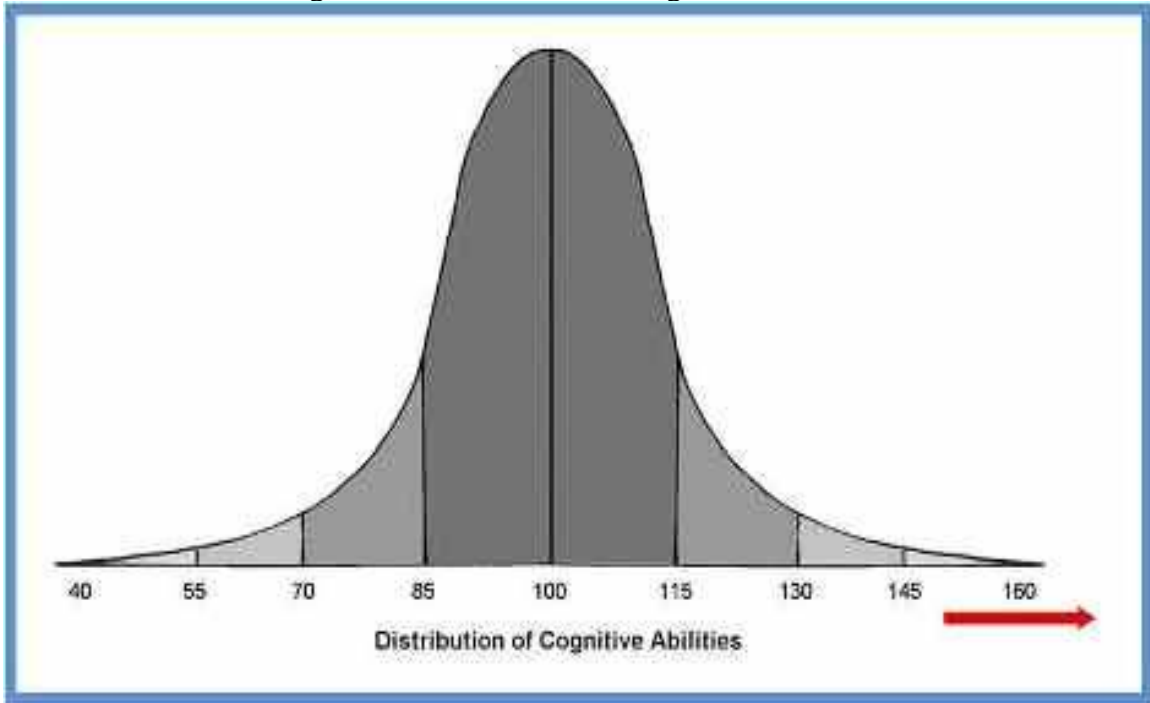
that cause underachievement. Most of the information available on this phenomenon is the result of the clinical experiences of one psychiatrist who specializes in working with exceptionally gifted patients.

There is a need for more research on the nature of underachievement within the profoundly gifted population. Significant research is available on underachievement mechanisms within the moderately gifted population; however, there is a dearth of research specific to the profoundly gifted population identified for this study. The lack of research is primarily due to the small size of this population, which consists of approximately 13 out of 10,000 individuals (Davidson Institute, n.d.). This lack of research and understanding has a direct and negative impact on the educational outcomes for profoundly gifted individuals; therefore, there is a need to address this phenomenon through additional study.

According to *Guiding the Gifted Child* (Webb et al., 2002), the average individual's IQ is 100. Most members of the population (68.26%) fall within one standard deviation of the mean, with IQ scores between 85 to 115. Individuals considered gifted have IQ scores between the second and third standard deviation above the mean. Statistically, 2.14% of the population falls between the second and third standard deviation above the mean, with IQ scores between 130 to 145.

Profoundly gifted individuals are those with IQ scores three standard deviations above the mean (145 and above; Davidson Institute, n.d.). Only 0.13% of the population is more than three standard deviations above the mean, with IQ scores between 145 to 160 (Webb et al., 2002).

Figure 1.1: Distribution of Cognitive Abilities



*Note.* Adapted from the Davidson Institute for Talent Development.

Most gifted children struggle with issues such as asynchrony, self-identity, and peer acceptance (Neihart, 2006). The needs of the profoundly gifted, however, differ from those of individuals with other levels of giftedness. Profoundly gifted individuals who tend toward extreme introversion may struggle with issues such as social isolation, extremely heightened sensitivities, overwhelming inner drive, grandiosity, guilt, and the perceived need to camouflage their abilities (Gross, 2006).

Profoundly gifted adolescents particularly struggle with existential issues of the meaning, purpose, and absurdity of life (Grobman, 2006). Issues such as the meaning of life and death may be too much for most children to contemplate, but profoundly gifted individuals grapple with these existential issues from an early age (Jackson & Peterson,



2003). A prominent research clinician described the experience of a profoundly gifted child:

Another 7-year-old girl's concern with the essence of life was expressed one summer on a family trip to the national parks. Sitting at the edge of Bryce Canyon, she burst into tears. When she calmed down, her parents learned that she felt regret for all those people who committed suicide. Had they been able to see the beauty and grandeur of this national treasure, she felt certain, they would have been inspired to stay alive. (Grobman, 2006, p. 202)

It is important to view the obstacles that profoundly gifted individuals face as they do—through the lens of existentialism—to understand their lived experiences and gain insight into their realities. Meeting these individuals on their terms makes it easier to unravel the factors causing their troublesome behaviors as they move through adolescence and into adulthood. Grobman (2006) noted, “By mid-adolescence, these exceptionally gifted young people had begun to seriously and consistently undermine their gifted development. Each limited how he or she used his or her potential strengths and began to act in other very self-destructive ways” (p. 205).

Over the past 50 years, educators and researchers worldwide have been intrigued by the perplexing phenomenon of underachievement among gifted students (International Gifted Consortium: Research Center for the Highly and Profoundly Gifted, n.d.). Research on underachievement began to emerge around the mid-20th century, providing the foundational body of knowledge on the subject (Diaz, 1998). There is a need to examine underachievement in this population from an educational perspective. The lack of research and understanding of this population's issues makes addressing their concerns a challenge. The small size of the population has meant little research on profoundly gifted individuals; therefore, scholars and educators do not understand this group well. The standard explanations for their underachievement, such as poor educational fit, peers

who reject them, parenting issues, environmental mismatches, perfectionism, and asynchronous development, do not seem adequate (Grobman, 2006). Interested researchers have recently established an international consortium to more closely study this population (International Gifted Consortium: Research Center for the Highly and Profoundly Gifted, n.d.).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to examine, through the lived experiences of underachieving profoundly gifted adolescents, the contributing factors to underachievement among this population.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are profoundly gifted young adults' reflections of their development during adolescence?
2. What are profoundly gifted young adults' perceptions of their barriers and supports during adolescence?
3. What are parents' perceptions of their profoundly gifted children's development during adolescence?
4. What are the barriers and supports for profoundly gifted adolescents as they transition into adulthood?

### **Target Audience**

The target audience for this research study includes educators, psychologists who work with gifted and talented students, study participants, and members of the profoundly gifted community—in other words, members of schools for profoundly gifted students, support groups, and research organizations targeting profoundly gifted individuals.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Absurdity.** The idea that a logical observer will conclude that there is no meaning inherent in the world beyond what the individual gives it (Philosophy Index, n.d.).

**Asynchrony.** Disparate rates of intellectual, emotional, and physical growth or development often displayed by gifted children (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], n.d.).

**Authenticity.** The idea that one should act as oneself and not for others (Crowell, 2017).

**Existence precedes essence.** The notion that humans are first individuals— independent, conscious beings—who are not defined by preconceived categories in which the individuals might fit (Wartenberg, 2008).

**Existentialism.** A modern philosophical theory of the subjective, or personal, aspects of existence (Magrini, 2012).

**Gifted students.** Students, children, or young people with evidence of high achievement capabilities in intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacities or in specific academic fields who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school to fully develop those capabilities (Department of Education, 2014).

**Introversion.** The tendency for an individual to be concerned with one's thoughts and feelings rather than with external things (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.).

**Nonproducer.** Gifted individuals who chose not to achieve for whatever reason (Deslisle & Galbraith, 2002).

**Overexcitabilities.** A theory proposed by Kazimierz Dąbrowski, a Polish psychologist, psychiatrist, and physician, that indicates that some individuals have

heightened sensitivities, awareness, and intensities in one or more of five areas: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional (NAGC, n.d.).

**Profoundly gifted.** Individuals who score in the 99.9th percentile on IQ tests and have an exceptionally high level of intellectual prowess. These students score at least three standard deviations above the norm on the bell curve, so they are at the extreme end of the intelligence, or IQ, continuum (Davidson Institute, n.d.).

**Radical acceleration.** An educational progression that results in students completing high school 3 or more years earlier than their same-age peers (Gross, 2006).

**Underachievement.** The discrepancy between a student's performance and the student's potential or ability to perform at a much higher level (NAGC, n.d.).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Gifted and talented students underachieve for many different reasons. Students with significant academic potential sometimes perform below a level commensurate with their abilities (Reis & McCoach, 2002). This literature review begins with information about giftedness and the relevant definitions. This chapter also presents the characteristics of the profoundly gifted, including the social-emotional, educational, and schooling aspects, followed by a description of the phenomenon of underachievement. There is also an operational definition of underachievement, followed by the most common contributing factors of underachievement found in the literature. Next is a brief introduction to phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) and its relationship with existentialism (Magrini, 2012). Finally, the chapter presents an overview of existentialism and the rationale for choosing existentialism as the theory for framing this study.

### **Giftedness Defined**

Despite the lack of a universal definition of giftedness (Coleman, 2004), there is a consensus that the gifted, like all individuals, have specific academic (Gross, 2006), social, and emotional (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006) needs. Gifted individuals, both typically and profoundly, must have these needs met to “ensure appropriate, let alone optimal functioning” (Kopelman, 2016, p. 14). Typically, gifted students are those

individuals who score at least two standard deviations above the norm on a standardized intellectual, academic, or achievement test (Boazmen & Sayler, 2011). Profoundly gifted students score at least three standard deviations above the norm (Davidson Institute, n.d.).

A further complication is that giftedness is a variable term with multiple definitions. Generally, giftedness can indicate intellectual abilities or achievement in specific or general dimensions (NAGC, 2010). Because of the variability in definitions at the federal, state, and research level, following is a brief description of each of the definitions of giftedness at the federal, state, and research levels.

### ***Federal Definition***

The Marland Report, published in 1972, defined gifted at the federal level. At that time, superior standardized test scores, reports of teachers and other professionals, the capability for advanced skills and insight, and the demonstration or potential for talent indicated giftedness (Marland, 1972). According to the Elementary Secondary Education Act, the current federal definition of giftedness is

Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (Department of Education, 2014, sect. 27)

### ***State Definition***

Educational leaders from each state create and publish the definitions of giftedness. Because of the varying state-level definitions, there are various descriptions of gifted in the United States. In Florida, a gifted student is one “who has superior intellectual development and is capable of high performance” (Florida Department of Education, 2017, p. 4). In Nevada, which is the location of profoundly gifted

organizations such as the Davidson Institute for Talent Development and the Davidson Academy, a “gifted and talented pupil [is] a person under the age of 18 years who demonstrates such outstanding academic skills or aptitudes that he cannot progress effectively in a regular school program and therefore needs special instruction or special services” (Nevada Department of Education, n.d.). In addition to defining term, state leaders also determine if they will mandate the services, how much funding to allocate for services, and the professional criteria for educators teaching gifted learners (NAGC State of the States, 2013).

### ***Research Definition***

Similar to intellectual disabilities, there is a continuum of giftedness that ranges from typical to profound. The psychometric levels of giftedness used for academic and research purposes are gifted (IQ scores of 130 to 145), highly gifted (145 to 160), and exceptionally and profoundly gifted (160 and above; Kline & Meckstroth, 1985). These are the terms used when referring to specific levels of giftedness.

### **Characteristics of the Profoundly Gifted**

Highly and profoundly gifted individuals are “those whose advancement is significantly beyond the norm of the gifted where advancement refers to aptitude or potential rather than performance” (Jackson & Peterson, 2003, p. 175). Scholars have studied the characteristics of profoundly gifted individuals since the first half of the 20th century. Lewis Terman and Leta Stetter Hollingworth are the two most notable individuals associated with early research on the profoundly gifted population. According to Hollingworth (1942), “Exceptionally gifted learners demonstrate a capacity and predilection for complex reasoning, a need for precision, facility with abstract material

and awareness of underlying patterns, ease with the use of metaphors and symbols, and an early grasp of an issue” (p. 53).

Hollingworth (1931) is the most notable researcher associated with this population, having studied the unique adjustment problems that gifted children experience (Silverman, 1990). Hollingworth spent several years working with profoundly gifted individuals and contributed a wealth of information on the characteristics of profoundly gifted individuals. Hollingworth recognized the increased potential for social and emotional difficulties in profoundly gifted students beyond the challenges typically observed in moderately gifted students (Silverman, 1990); specifically, “students with IQs of 160 and above—the profoundly gifted—were more likely to report social isolation than students with IQs ranging from 125 to 155” (Silverman, 1990, p. 174). Hollingworth observed the common traits of loneliness, isolation, the creation of imaginary worlds, argumentativeness, zeal for accuracy, impatience with superficiality and foolishness, and the desire to find like minds in profoundly gifted children (Silverman, 1990).

According to Kline and Meckstroth (1985), “Emotional and social diversity are as clearly manifest in gifted persons as is intellectual exceptionalism” (p. 24). Among the three gradients within the gifted range, there is as “much potential variation in comparing exceptionally gifted and typical gifted children as in comparing an average child with a child well below the norm” (Kline & Meckstroth, 1985, p. 24). Profoundly gifted learners “evidence more energy than moderately gifted individuals; they think faster and are more intent and focused on their interests” (Blaas, 2014, p. 243). When describing profoundly gifted students, Blaas (2014) found that



They exhibit a higher degree of ability in most of the traits identified with giftedness. Such children are less able to benefit from regular classroom experiences, and modifications to their educational programs need to be more comprehensive and developed to a much higher degree to meet their needs than is necessary for less gifted learners. (p. 245)

Profoundly gifted individuals have “unique cognitive, social, and emotional characteristics that differentiate them from their same-age”, nongifted and typically gifted peers (Kopelman, 2016, p. 18). Despite these strengths, profoundly gifted children’s awareness of how different they are from their peers often causes them to feel insecure (Kopelman, 2016).

The social and emotional characteristics of the profoundly gifted are intertwined. These characteristics can be sources of strength but also vulnerabilities. Profoundly gifted students generally have “healthy social and emotional dimensions” (Kopelman, 2016, p. 16), including “increased sensitivity to their peers and a desire and ability to form mature relationships” (Peterson, 2009, p.16). When compared to their same-aged peers, gifted individuals demonstrate more advanced play interests, friendship patterns, and understanding of common social norms (Robinson, 2008). Although some of these traits may be strengths, the social differentness can cause some profoundly gifted children to feel isolated, even regressing their behaviors to match those of their similar-aged peers (Kopelman, 2016). Janos et al. (1985) discovered that 8-year-old profoundly gifted children, in comparison to their same-aged peers, had older friends while simultaneously believing they did not have many friends.

Exceptional speed and capacity for intuition are indications of an exceptional mind (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). Jackson and Peterson (2003) noted, “These individuals tend toward psychological introversion and are characterized by a rich inner life,

embracing intellectual activity, emotions, sensations, and concept formation” (p. 177).

The very nature of this group’s precocity is a risk for vulnerability factors, such as social isolation and depression (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). Profoundly gifted children are at risk of social isolation due to the low probability that a profoundly gifted child will encounter a same-aged, similar-ability peer and the low possibility that an intellectually comparable, much older peer could want to engage with them socially (Gross, 2006). Difficulties in the social arena could adversely affect a profoundly gifted child’s or adolescent’s emotional experience (Gross, 2000). Hollingworth (1931) recognized an increased risk for social and emotional difficulties in profoundly gifted students, considerably beyond the difficulties experienced by moderately gifted students. Findings showed that students with IQs of 160 and above were more likely to report social isolation than students with IQs ranging from 125 to 155 (Hollingworth, 1931).

Like other populations, profoundly gifted students also experience clinical and existential depression (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). Though depression occurs in all populations, scholars believe the state to be an underreported phenomenon in profoundly gifted students, who worry that their problems will be burdensome and overwhelming for others (Peterson, 2009) and can mask symptoms of depression (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). This evidence indicates that

Some of the vulnerabilities unique to profoundly gifted individuals, including social isolation due to a lack of similar-ability peers and under-reported depression due to masking, extend above and beyond those experienced by moderately gifted individuals. (Kopelman, 2016, p. 17)

### **Education and Schooling for Profoundly Gifted Students**

Profoundly gifted individuals often have exceptional academic and career achievements, including the “quality of universities attended, advanced degrees earned,

and significant contributions made to their fields” (Lubinski et al., 2001, p. 722). Their achievements exceed those of gifted and highly gifted individuals. However, profoundly gifted individuals have unique, often neglected academic needs (Colangelo et al., 2004). Without proper educational placement, profoundly gifted students may “languish in academic, social, and emotional development” (Gross & van Vliet, 2005, p.167).

Generally, profoundly gifted students receive the same services provided to their typically gifted peers, including acceleration and enrichment activities (Kopelman, 2016). Educational options for profoundly gifted students include acceleration, specialized schools, homeschooling, online courses, and early colleges (Kopelman, 2016). Typically, gifted students can meet their educational needs through subject-matter acceleration and enrichment activities; however, profoundly gifted students are most likely to achieve their educational needs through “radical acceleration” (Gross, 2006). Radical acceleration is an educational progression that results in a student completing high school 3 or more years earlier than their same-age peers (Gross, 2006).

The “better environmental fit that results from appropriate academic interventions, in turn, influences the social and emotional development of this population” (Kopelman, 2016, p. 18). Gross and van Vliet (2005) found that, among profoundly gifted individuals, radical acceleration was a particularly useful educational method, as it resulted in “greater academic achievement, lower levels of anxiety, and higher self-esteem when compared to their similar-ability, not–radically accelerated peers” (p.159). Most profoundly gifted students described radical acceleration as beneficial for educational achievement and success (Lubinski et al., 2001).

## Defining Underachievement

The previous section provided information on the various definitions of giftedness at multiple levels. Additionally, the section presented the characteristics of the profoundly gifted as well as their education and schooling. The next sections will present underachievement in moderately gifted and profoundly gifted students.

Over the past 50 years, educators and researchers worldwide have been intrigued by the perplexing phenomenon of underachievement among gifted and talented students (Diaz, 1998) (Grobman, 2006; McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Research on underachievement emerged in the mid-20th century, providing the foundational body of knowledge on the subject (Diaz, 1998). The research presented a variety of perspectives on the definition of the construct of underachievement as well as the various causes of underachievement (Diaz, 1998).

The most common definition of underachievement is a discrepancy between potential and performance (Whitmore, 1980). The definition of underachievement used in this study is the one proposed by Reis and McCoach (2000):

Underachievers are students who exhibit severe discrepancy between *expected achievement* and *actual achievement*. To be classified as an underachiever, the discrepancy between expected and actual achievement must not be the direct result of a diagnosed learning disability. *Gifted* underachievers are underachievers who exhibit *superior* scores on measures of expected achievement (i.e., standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments). (p. 157; emphasis added)

The discrepancy model is often the means used to assess underachievement.

Siegle (2013) noted, “Gifted underachievers are those who fail to develop further the advanced skills they initially demonstrated or those whose untapped potential failed to materialize” (p. 9). Siegle suggested comparing IQ and achievement scores with grades to

identify and measure underachievement. Rimm (2003) also used the discrepancy model, indicating that gifted underachievers are students who do not perform to their tested abilities over an extended period. Delisle and Galbraith (2002) suggested that underachievement is two separate phenomena. Some individuals want to achieve but underachieve because they do not have the necessary skills, whereas others simply choose not to achieve, which Delisle and Galbraith labeled “non-producers” (p. 167).

### **Factors Associated with Underachievement in Moderately Gifted Individuals**

Several factors contribute to underachievement among moderately gifted and talented students. According to Diaz (1998), low self-perception is one of the most common characteristics of underachievers. McCoach and Siegle (2003) stated that “students with more positive attitudes toward school and teachers are more likely to value the goals of the school and put forth the effort to achieve those goals” (p. 151). They also identified a high correlation between motivation and goal valuation, which indicates a relationship between a student’s goals and the motivation to complete those goals (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). In addition to personal characteristics, many cases of underachievement could be the result of a psychological disorder (Reis & McCoach, 2002). Additionally, Speirs Neumeister and Hebert (2003) identified a strong correlation between the educational environment and academic achievement.

#### ***Personal Characteristics***

**Low Self-Perception.** Low self-perception is one of the most common characteristics of underachievers (Diaz, 1998). According to Peterson and Colangelo (1996), self-perception of ability differs along subject lines. Most of the literature indicates that gifted underachievers suffer from low academic self-perceptions; however,

most of the research on the subject has been qualitative or case studies, which is an incorrect notion (McCoach & Siegle, 2013). McCoach and Siegle suggested,

Although low academic self-perceptions may be characteristic of some gifted underachievers, it is not necessarily characteristic of the majority of gifted underachievers. ...Perhaps both gifted underachievers and achievers have high academic self-perceptions because both groups know that they possess the cognitive skills and abilities to be successful in school. (p. 150)

Gifted underachievers might lag behind their more successful peers, comparing their capabilities to those of their peers. Consequently, these underachieving students feel confident in their academic abilities despite their low academic achievements. McCoach and Siegle (2013) hypothesized that “high academic ability acts as a protective factor against low academic self-perceptions” (p. 150).

**Attitudes Toward School, Teachers, and Classes.** Attitudes toward school, teachers, and classes are key factors in underachievement among high-ability students. According to McCoach and Siegle (2003), when students feel more positive about school and their teachers, they are more likely to value the goals of their schools. Speirs Neumeister and Hebert (2003) found that when students dislike a teacher who disrespects them, they will often get distracted from their desires to learn the material presented. If teachers do not show respect for their students and instead display superiority and arrogance toward students, students often develop a mutual disrespect (Speirs Neumeister & Hebert, 2003). Speirs Neumeister and Hebert indicated that teachers play critical roles in motivating their students to achieve academically. However, positive attitudes also have an indirect impact on achievement, as students might be motivated to achieve to earn the respect of their teachers (Speirs Neumeister & Hebert, 2003). The findings by

Speirs Neumeister and Hebert aligned with those of other researchers indicating a strong connection between underachievement and teacher-student relationships.

Speirs Neumeister and Hebert (2003) suggested that some gifted students underachieve because they feel they understand their learning needs best and proceed accordingly. Some students do not believe they benefit from their classes, instead choosing to follow personal paths to learning by studying unfamiliar material independently (Speirs Neumeister & Hebert, 2003). According to Peterson and Colangelo (1996), “When highly intelligent individuals are turned off by school or are struggling to stay involved during adolescent or family upheaval, their underachievement may represent great pain and frustration, not to mention the loss of potential adult productivity” (p. 406). Delisle and Galbraith (2002) asserted that underachievement could occur due to the lack of challenge at a young age, perfectionism, and overall low self-image. Nonproducers fail to see the relevance of specific tasks or goals to their lives.

**Motivation/Self-Regulation and Goal Valuation.** Motivation/self-regulation and goal valuation correlate (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Research indicates a strong correlation between a student’s goals and the motivation and self-regulation necessary to achieve the identified goals (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). McCoach and Siegle (2003) suggested that “goal valuation is a precursor to motivation and self-regulation” (p. 151). When students “value academic goals, they become motivated to achieve academically” (McCoach & Siegle, 2003. p.151). The motivation, in turn, produces the self-regulation skills necessary to achieve their academic goals (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). As McCoach and Siegle noted, “Key feature that distinguishes gifted achievers from gifted underachievers is the goals they set for themselves and the effort they put forth to achieve

those goals” (p. 151). If students do not value the task or the outcome, they are unlikely to possess the necessary motivation to achieve their best when completing a task (Blaas, 2014). McCoach and Siegle indicated that many students underachieve because they find no intrinsic or extrinsic benefits of attending school, thus not putting forth effort. According to Falck (2020), highly intelligent individuals often adopt an attitude of “just because I can do it doesn’t mean I will” (p. 27), indicating that one must find a task worthwhile before committing to engage in it. Intelligent people are motivated by novelty and challenge and are not satisfied with typical individuals’ goals (Falck, 2019). Speirs Neumeister and Hebert (2003) found that achievement for some students is highly dependent on the content of the courses.

### ***Emotional and Psychological Issues***

Many cases of underachievement are the result of several psychological disorders. Students who experience psychological distress may face sudden, severe underachievement (Reis & McCoach, 2002). As noted by Reis and McCoach (2002), students who have psychological conditions may become “chronic underachievers, while students experiencing acute psychological distress may experience sudden, severe underachievement” (p. 120). According to Diaz (1998), “Insufficient perseverance, low sense of efficacy, and inappropriate coping strategies have been identified as contributing factors to underachievement” (p. 119). Educators must be aware of signs of psychological distress.

Dąbrowski (1964) identified gifted children as releasing their emotions through five overexcitabilities (OEs): intellectual, imaginal, emotional, psychomotor, and sensual. Underachieving gifted students display any number of these OEs (Piechowski,



2013). A surplus of energy, a need for physical activity, and psychomotor expressions of emotional tension indicate psychomotor OEs (Piechowski, 2013). Sensual OEs present through enhanced senses and expressions of aesthetic pleasure; intellectual OEs usually present through intense mental activity, questioning and problem-solving, and reflective thoughts; and imaginal overexcitabilities are evident through free play of the imagination and the desire and capacity to live in a world of fantasy (Piechowski, 2013). Finally, intensified feelings and emotions, strong somatic expressions, strong affective expressions, and the ability to form deep relationships indicate emotional OEs (Piechowski, 2013). Although OEs may appear to be strengths, they can also present obstacles to learning. According to Piechowski (2013),

Because gifted individuals can be so greatly stimulated, and because they perceive and process things so differently, gifted children are often misunderstood. What is normal to them is not perceived as normal by others. Their excitement is viewed as excessive, their high energy as hyperactivity, their persistence as nagging, their questioning as undermining authority, their imagination as not paying attention, their persistence as being disruptive, their strong emotions and sensitivity as immaturity, their creativity and self-directedness as oppositional disorder. The more gifted they are, the farther they stand out from the norm. (Piechowski, 2013, p. 99)

### **School Environment**

Educators must be more accommodating to students who demonstrate alternative preferences for learning material (Speirs Neumeister & Hebert, 2003). Alternative modes of learning are potential means of increasing students' motivation (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). According to Reis and McCoach (2002), gifted students who receive appropriate educational opportunities typically begin to show improvements. Emerick (1992) found that gifted underachievers tend to exhibit independent thinking, a willingness to take risks, creativity, and love for what they do. Kim (2008) noted, "Creativity can be a gift.

However, it is just as true that creativity can be a curse for some students in traditional school environments where it can lead to underachievement” (p. 239). According to Kim, creative children learn best when they can get actively involved and do not have to stay confined to their seats for long periods.

Blaas (2014) identified a “strong relationship between social-emotional difficulties and school outcomes” (p. 250). Students’ social-emotional well-being predicts their success in school (Blaas, 2014). Unfortunately, when students underachieve for whatever reason, educators may group them into classes with students who have nothing in common with them intellectually, an occurrence that could have a negative impact on school (Peterson & Colangelo, 1996).

### **Underachievement in the Profoundly Gifted**

Jackson and Peterson (2003) stated, “It is rare for highly gifted individuals to escape the effects of their differences from age peers which places them at risk for underachievement” (p. 178). Profoundly gifted individuals perceive the world in complex ways and may struggle to find others with whom they can exchange ideas and share their inner thoughts (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). Exceptionally and profoundly gifted individuals often battle with psychological issues that could cause self-destructive behaviors and underachievement (Grobman, 2006). Arrogant attitudes can also cause problems among the exceptionally and profoundly gifted (Grobman, 2006). According to Grobman (2006), exceptionally gifted students often display “rudeness, disrespectfulness, entitled arrogant attitudes, and provocative behavior” (p. 207) toward their teachers and school, which are self-destructive behaviors that often result in underachievement. Grobman continued,

Some common factors that contributed to underachievement among exceptionally gifted individuals were: periodic feelings of strangeness and isolation, feelings of being controlled rather than being in control, guilt and shame, fears of envy and retaliation, feeling like a failure and irrational fears of defectiveness or disability. (Grobman, 2006, pp. 200-205)

Grobman (2009) indicated that these “unconscious conflicts” resulted in “dramatic self-destructive behaviors and underachievement” (p. 201). Some exceptionally gifted individuals underachieve because they cannot deal with conflicts and life events that occur at each stage of their development (Grobman, 2009). Underachieving profoundly gifted individuals tend to lack the necessary discipline, frustration tolerance, or emotional maturity to reach their expected potentials.

Exceptionally gifted individuals have “unique ways of perceiving the world, seeing relationships between superficially unrelated things, their very personal senses of beauty, and off-beat, quirky senses of humor leave them feeling socially isolated” (Grobman, 2006, p. 204). Additionally, exceptionally gifted individuals often feel tremendous guilt about their traits and abilities, and sometimes even uncomfortable with their effortless successes (Grobman, 2006). According to Grobman (2009),

Because [exceptionally gifted children] had been given more endowment; they felt like others had been robbed of their fair share and figured out ways to equalize the difference. ...All accomplishments took place in a sort of gigantic zero-sum game in which their “win” was someone else’s loss. (Grobman, 2009, p. 117)

Secretly, many underachieving profoundly gifted students fear retaliation from their peers (Grobman, 2006).

Exceptionally gifted individuals also experience frustration when trying to “perfectly reproduce what is in their mind’s eye” (Grobman, 2006, p. 204). Their “precocious ability could not make up for lack of discipline, poor frustration tolerance,

and little capacity to delay gratification” (Grobman, 2006, p. 204). Rather than face their limitations, these individuals tend to give up and withdraw (Grobman, 2006). Grobman (2006) observed:

By mid-adolescence, these exceptionally gifted young people had begun to seriously and consistently undermine their gifted development. Their patterns of underachievement and destructiveness went beyond the withdrawal, distractibility, procrastination, and sudden loss of interest that were characteristic of their younger years. (p. 205)

Additionally, these individuals feel haunted by “irrational fears about being defective or having a disability resulting from pressures for acceptance, conformity, or internal and external demands for excellence” (Grobman, 2009, p. 120). Their anxieties about their perceived deficiencies cause significant distress, which leads them to feel angry and pessimistic (Grobman, 2006). Because these individuals are not aware of their deep internal conflicts, they may struggle to understand and effectively cope with their underachievement (Grobman, 2009). The “rejected offers of support or remediation” further contribute to their underachievement (Grobman, 2006, p. 202).

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

The previous sections presented the research on underachievement among both the moderately and the profoundly gifted. The following section presents the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used to guide this study. The theories reviewed are Erikson’s eight stages of psychosocial development, asynchronous development, and existentialism.

### ***Erik Erikson: Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development***

Erik Erikson, an influential 20th-century psychologist, developed the theory of the eight stages of psychosocial development (Cross, 2001). A psychosocial crisis of two conflicting forces is a characteristic of these eight stages (Crain, 2011). At each stage, the individual must reconcile these forces, which have both biological and sociocultural components (Crain, 2011). Upon reconciling the conflicting forces, the individual can emerge from the stage with a new corresponding virtue (Crain, 2011). Although mastery of the stage is not a necessity of moving to the next stage, unresolved issues may arise in the future as a result of unsuccessfully completing a stage (Crain, 2011).

In this theory, Erikson established a framework for understanding the typical developmental patterns of people (Cross, 2001). Erikson broke with the traditional thinking of his time, which was that people completed their developments by the end of adolescence (Cross, 2001). The eight stages of psychosocial development are trust versus mistrust (0 to 1 year), autonomy versus shame/doubt (1 to 3 years), initiative versus guilt (3 to 5 years), competence versus inferiority (5 to 10 years), identity versus role confusion (11 to 18 years), intimacy versus isolation (19 to 40 years), generativity versus despair (40 to 60 years), and integrity versus despair (60 years and above). Conflicts arise at each stage from an individual's interaction with the environment (Cross, 2001).

According to Cross (2001), identification of giftedness frequently correlates to early evidence of ability; however, giftedness may be missed if individuals do not resolve earlier crises. Gifted adolescents tend to develop their senses of self through their interactions with groups of people (Cross, 2001). Cross believed that becoming a "healthy adult is tied to resolving the crisis of identity or suffering the feelings associated

with role confusion” (p. 31). It can be a challenge to resolve a crisis in modern culture due to the mixed messages gifted children receive (Cross, 2001). Gifted children can become so confused by the information that they may engage in numerous behaviors to cope (Coleman & Cross, 2001). Coping strategies include hiding or pretending to be what one is not, underachievement, and other behaviors with potentially serious consequences (Cross, 2001). Individuals working with gifted students should recognize that such youth can advance through developmental stages at earlier ages than Erikson suggested (Cross, 2001). Educators need to understand that some gifted children have the intellectual ability to understand the world years ahead of their chronological age while still having the same emotional development as their same-age peers, which can result in conflict (Cross, 2001).

### ***Asynchronous Development***

According to the NAGC (n.d.), asynchrony is the mismatch among the cognitive, emotional, and physical development of gifted individuals. Asynchronous development occurs when an individual develops the social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and creative aspects on a trajectory outside of the norm and at an uneven rate (NAGC, n.d.). Some gifted and talented children develop asynchronously (NAGC, n.d.).

Gifted children often have significant variations within themselves and develop unevenly across skill levels (NAGC, n.d.). Asynchrony is a defining feature of giftedness. The Columbus Group (1991) provided a new definition of giftedness that included this concept:

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher

intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991)

Gifted individuals reach milestones of development on schedules unique to them, and they are often out of sync with society's expectations. Additionally, gifted individuals may also be out of sync internally, experiencing cognitive, social, and emotional development on separate and sometimes quite different timetables (Tolan, 2007).

### ***Existentialism***

Whereas much of philosophy presents how the world is and how individuals perceive truth, phenomenology indicates that what matters is an individual's perceptions and internal experiences (Philosophy Index, n.d.). Existentialism has this same concept for human nature and so-called "truths" (Philosophy Index, n.d.). Existential theory indicates that an individual is what is important and that the individual is free to give life meaning (Philosophy Index, n.d.). Together, existentialism and phenomenology are means of focusing less on the facts of the world and more on the self (Philosophy Index, n.d.).

Existentialism is a modern philosophical theory of the subjective, or personal, aspects of existence (Magrini, 2012). Existentialism is a way of existing while individuals inquire into their existence (Magrini, 2012). Despite existentialism beginning in the 19th century, the first prominent existentialist was Jean-Paul Sartre, who suggested that "what all existentialists have in common is the fundamental doctrine that existence precedes essence" (Copleston, 1948; Popkin & Stroll, 1993). As a philosophical doctrine, existentialism indicates an individual's struggle to derive meaning from existence and the

attempts to grapple with the apparent lack of purpose and absurd realities inherent to life as a modern human (Philosophy Index, n.d.). Many existential philosophers have concluded that all thinking individuals have the responsibility of deciding for themselves how they will derive meaning from existence, because it is irrational to expect that an external source will provide any such purpose (Philosophy Index, n.d.). Profoundly gifted individuals often struggle with this particular reality from the very early stages of their individuation process, which has significant effects on their personalities and worldviews. Existentialism also includes the concepts that existence precedes essence, absurdity, and authenticity, ideas with which profoundly gifted individuals may struggle.

**Existence Precedes Essence.** Sartre believed that the central proposition of existentialism is that existence precedes essence; thus, the most crucial consideration is that humans are first individuals, independent, conscious beings undefined by preconceived categories in which individuals might fit (Wartenberg, 2008). The true essence of an individual is the actual life lived, not the life imposed arbitrarily by others (Wartenberg, 2008). Individuals create personal values and determine a meaning to life through their consciousness (Heidegger, 1993). The understanding is that individuals do not have a predetermined “essence” before life begins; instead, individuals are born into this world and then create their essence (Magrini, 2012). Another central theme is the “belief that we experience, and philosophize out of, moods such as anxiety, dread, and despair, which imply an estrangement from the world, others, and ourselves” (Magrini, 2012, p. 2).



**Absurdity.** An essential concept in existentialism is the notion of the absurd. Within the philosophical doctrine of existentialism, the term absurdity is the idea that a logical observer will conclude that there is no meaning inherent in the world beyond what the individual gives it (Philosophy Index, n.d.). A large body of work by early existentialists indicates the meandering aimlessness with which many individuals travel through life, searching for meaning but ultimately not finding it. In the end, these characters, meant to serve as proxies for the reader, conclude that meaning for existence defined by the individual will always be a far more stable foundation than any externally imposed sense of purpose (Philosophy Index, n.d.). This concept also presents the amorality or “unfairness” of the world, showing the folly of searching for an external meaning for life but also of searching for an external sense of morality, or right and wrong (Wartenberg, 2008). Existential philosophers assert that the universe is either hostile or indifferent to humans’ need for clarity and purpose and that ultimately each individual must discover these things for themselves (Philosophy Index, n.d.).

**Authenticity.** Some philosophers have concluded that the logical course of action in the face of existentialism is to live life authentically per one’s values. The concept of authentic existence includes the notion that one has to “create oneself” and then live in accordance with the created self (Philosophy Index, n.d.). Authenticity means that one should act as oneself, not as “one’s acts” for others (Crowell, 2017). There is also a “distrust for grand explanations for phenomena that are grounded in human ‘reason’ and that there are many legitimate ways of knowing and experiencing the world” (Magrini, 2012, p. 2). When individuals live authentically, they live by their visions of who they are. In doing so, individuals can derive meaning from their existence because their

actions fit with their views of what is important in the world and what has intrinsic value rather than the value attributed to social norms.

### **Similar Research**

Underachievement research of moderately gifted individuals has shown several common characteristics (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Many moderately gifted children struggle with issues such as low self-perception and poor attitudes about school, teachers, and classes (Diaz, 1998).

There are strong connections between motivation and self-regulation and goal valuation, indicating that moderately gifted individuals question the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of school (McCoach & Siegle, 2003).

Some cases of underachievement are the result of psychological disorders that could cause sudden, severe underachievement (Reis & McCoach, 2002). OEs can also present obstacles to learning (Piechowski, 2013), indicating a need for alternative learning environments for some gifted students (Speirs Neumeister & Hebert, 2003). Although there are numerous studies on underachievement among typical gifted students, there is little research specific to the underachievement experienced by profoundly gifted individuals (Grobman, 2006, 2009).

Jerald Grobman, a psychiatrist and psychologist who specializes in working with and treating profoundly gifted adolescents and adults, published the most comparable research (Grobman, 2006) to this study. Grobman identified specific patterns among the profoundly gifted patients under his care during his years of practice. For several years, Grobman (2006) observed a group of exceptionally gifted adolescents between 14 and 25 years old who had presented to his practice with severe symptoms of anxiety, depression,

self-destructive behaviors, and underachievement. Grobman found that “each phase of gifted development was accompanied by particular anxieties and conflicts” (p. 199). The inability of these individuals to resolve conflicts related to their giftedness caused them severe distress (Grobman, 2006) that often resulted in severe underachievement and self-destructive behaviors. His contributions to the field included information on the lack of understanding of gifted individuals’ underachievement. Grobman may have provided some of the missing pieces of the individual experience of being profoundly gifted and how those experiences contribute to underachievement through his observations. Grobman identified a need for more research on this population. The findings from the present study both align with and differ from findings from Grobman’s clinical observations.

### **Conclusion**

The limited research on highly, exceptionally, and profoundly gifted students indicates a need for more scholarly inquiry into the effect of internal factors associated with giftedness on underachievement and self-destructive behaviors among this population (Grobman, 2006). Parents and educators could use the knowledge obtained from this study to develop effective programs for supporting gifted students’ needs.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

To add to the body of knowledge on profoundly gifted adolescents, this study included in-depth interviews with five profoundly gifted individuals who experienced at least one 6-month period of underachievement during adolescence. The parents of each individual also provided their experiences for additional insight. This qualitative research study had a phenomenological design. Phenomenology is a research design for seeking reality through the lived experiences of the participants who have experienced a common phenomenon (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). The primary purpose of phenomenology is to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to the ‘universal essence’” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Phenomenology has various philosophies, including transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic theories (Cilesiz, 2011). This study used the existential theory through the incorporation of the need to focus on the participants’ meanings of the lived experiences (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine, through the lived experiences of underachieving profoundly gifted adolescents, the contributing factors to underachievement for this population.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are profoundly gifted young adults' reflections of their development during adolescence?
2. What are profoundly gifted young adults' perceptions of barriers and supports during adolescence?
3. What are parents' perceptions of their profoundly gifted children's development through adolescence?
4. What are barriers and supports for profoundly gifted adolescents as they move into adulthood?

## **Phenomenology**

Phenomenological researchers describe “the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p .75). The explicit purpose of phenomenology is to analyze the individual experiences of a phenomenon to determine its “universal essence” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). According to van Manen (1990),

The essence of a phenomenon is a universal, which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestation of the essence of that phenomenon. ...A universal or essence may only be intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experiences. (p. 10)

Despite the differing perspectives among phenomenologists, the common philosophical assumption is that phenomenology is “the study of the lived experiences of persons, the view that these experiences are conscious ones, and that the development of the essences of the experiences, not explanations or analyses” (Creswell & Poth, p. 75). Stewart and Mickunas (1990) identified four broad philosophical perspectives in phenomenology:

- A return to the traditional tasks of philosophy.
- A philosophy without presuppositions.
- The intentionality of consciousness.
- The refusal of the subject-object dichotomy.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenological research studies have several defining features, including:

- An emphasis on a phenomenon to be explored, phrased in terms of a single concept or idea.
- The exploration of this phenomenon with a group of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon.
- A philosophical discussion about the basic ideas required for conducting phenomenology.
- The researcher must bracket themselves out of the study by discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon, a process also known as phenomenological reflection (van Manen, 1990).
- Data collection procedures for interviewing individuals who have similar experiences.
- Data analysis with systematic procedures to summarize “what” the individuals experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).
- The study ends with a descriptive passage of the “essence,” the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77).

## **Transcendental Phenomenology**

The research methods of transcendental phenomenology were the framework for this study. When using transcendental phenomenology, researchers focus less on their interpretations and more on the participants' descriptions of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology is a means "in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). The transcendental phenomenological approach also requires researchers to bracket their experiences, setting aside any personal connections with the phenomenon under investigation.

According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology consists of identifying a phenomenon to investigate, bracketing the investigator's experiences, and collecting data from individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon. Researchers complete data analysis by "reducing the information to significant statements or quotes that combine the statements into themes" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78). The key concepts of phenomenological philosophy include the lived experience; intentionality, doing something deliberately; epoche, a new point of view to avoid prejudgments; phenomenological reduction, describing experiences through textural language; imaginative variation, finding the possible meaning of the phenomenon and asking questions; and co-researchers, the participants as co-researchers (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015).

Transcendental phenomenology is the chosen research approach because it provided the opportunity to describe the experiences of each participant. Researchers use transcendental phenomenology to explore individuals' experiences in-depth. Additionally, this approach entails the exploration of a phenomenon in-depth and

provides the researcher with the opportunity to work with the participants as co-researchers. This researcher worked with the participants to obtain feedback after completing the data collection. Having participants as co-researchers is a means of ensuring the accuracy of transcripts and the validity of the study.

## **Research Design**

### ***Pilot Process***

A pilot test was the means of testing the open-ended interview questions before the research study. Pilot tests are useful for determining if there are issues within the interview design, providing the researcher with the opportunity to make revisions before beginning the study (Kvale, 2007). Two individuals, one young adult and one parent, pilot tested the interview questions constructed for this study. These individuals might not have fully met the criteria for the research study, which required participants to be between 18 to 25 years of age, profoundly gifted, and have experienced underachievement for at least 6 months during adolescence; however, they were familiar with the phenomenon. The pilot process is a beneficial means for determining the strength and appropriateness of the interview questions. The individuals were invited to participate in the piloting process through personal contacts from the profoundly gifted community. This researcher contacted each of these individuals and provided a brief explanation of the study and the details of participation. Each participant received an informed consent form before beginning the interview. Pilot interviews occurred via Zoom several weeks before formal data collection, with each interview lasting approximately 1 hour. The parent participant completed the first interview and answered each of the parent interview protocol questions; the young adult participant followed,



answering the participant interview protocol questions. The pilot interviews produced robust discussions of each of the interview questions. After the completion of both of the interviews, the researcher reviewed both audio recordings. After the completion of the pilot process, recruitment began.

### ***Recruitment***

An announcement made as a post to a large support group for profoundly gifted individuals and families was the means of recruiting the participants. This researcher has access to this support group as a member. An announcement provided the general information of the study, the purpose of the study, the inclusion criteria, and the connection the researcher had with the group. The group administrator required that the announcement also identified the researcher as a parent member of the group. The recruitment flyer created for this study was attached to the online post. The individuals who showed interest in participating in the study contacted the researcher using the information provided in the post and flyer.

After the flyer had circulated for several weeks and no interested individuals contacted the researcher, the recruitment method was changed to snowball sampling. Other contacts within the profoundly gifted community identified participants for the study, with online posts created and shared throughout the gifted community as the means of recruitment. The community partner for this study was instrumental in identifying additional participants.

Parent recruitment did not occur until after completion of the initial interviews with the young adult participants. The parents were then contacted to participate in an interview. Contact was made either through their children or via the approved e-mail

recruitment information for this study. The participating parents and young adults completed their interviews separately.

The participants received consent forms after they had scheduled their interviews. Additionally, the participants received the interview questions so they could have sufficient time to reflect on each question.

### ***Setting***

The setting for each interview varied, as the interviews occurred in multiple states. Participants took part either in person or online via Zoom. The researcher and the participants chose the location for the interviews based on convenience and how conducive the environment would be. Approximately half of the interviews occurred online via Zoom.

### ***Participants***

Once the recruitment process had produced the initial participants, the interviews with individuals who met the inclusion criteria commenced. Participant selection was from a small pool of profoundly gifted adolescents between the ages of 18 and 25 years who had experienced at least one period of underachievement. The inclusion criteria were profoundly gifted adolescents between 18 to 25 years of age with IQs at the 99.9th percentile who had experienced a period of underachievement that persisted for at least 6 months.

According to Dukes (1984), phenomenological studies should contain three to 10 participants. Purposeful sampling “allows one to intentionally select a group of participants that will best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148). Criterion sampling was the chosen

sampling method because it provided the researcher with the opportunity to select the participants who met specified criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was a requirement that all participants have firsthand experience with the phenomenon studied; therefore, criterion sampling was the method used to select individuals who “represent[ed] people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 157).

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

According to Turner (2010), “Creating effective research questions for the interview process is one of the most crucial components to interview design” (p. 755). Open-ended interview questions relevant to the research questions and grounded in the research literature are appropriate means for obtaining data from participants (Turner, 2010). All questions enabled the participants to reveal details about how they interpreted their experiences (Turner, 2010).

In qualitative studies, researchers commonly use an interview guide with a list of questions (cf. Silverman, 2009). The researcher should remain flexible with the questions; however, the guide is a means of ensuring consistency among the questions posed to the participants (McNamara, 2009). Accordingly, the researcher developed and followed an interview protocol for each participant.

Table 3.1: Participant Interview Questions

Question	Purpose	Citations
Tell me about yourself. Where did you grow up? How many siblings do you have? Do you have family members who are profoundly gifted?	Background information; building rapport	
What are your early memories around learning? Were you identified as profoundly gifted at an early age?	To get participants to think about early school experiences	Grobman, 2006; Jackson & Peterson, 2003; McCoach & Siegle, 2003
What are your personal reflections of growing up profoundly gifted? What does profoundly gifted mean to you practically?	Have the participants reflect on their experiences as a profoundly gifted child	Grobman, 2006; Jackson & Peterson, 2003; McCoach & Siegle, 2003
What positive or negative associations do you have with education?	Get the participants thinking about how they feel about school and to explore prior experiences	Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Grobman, 2006; Gross, 2006; McCoach & Siegle, 2003
How did peer perceptions (pressures/expectations) influence your relationship with academics?	Have participants explore influences	Grobman, 2006; McCoach & Siegle, 2003
When did your feelings and attitudes about school change or shift? How old were you? Was there anything that may have caused this shift?	Have participants discuss and explore their period of underachievement	Grobman, 2006; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Speirs Neumeister & Hebert, 2003
What is your personal experience with the phenomenon of underachievement? Do you feel that you have ever struggled to reach your academic potential due to external factors?	Prompt the participants to discuss what occurred during their underachievement period	Blaas, 2014; Diaz, 1998; Grobman, 2006

Table 1: Parent Interview Questions

Question	Purpose	Citations
Tell me about yourself: Where are you from? Where were your children born?	Background information; building rapport	
What do you like to do during your free time? What types of activities did you enjoy with your children?	Building rapport	Grobman, 2006; Jackson & Peterson, 2003; McCoach & Siegle, 2003
What are your early memories around your child's learning? When were they identified as profoundly gifted?	Get participants thinking about their child's early experiences with school	Grobman, 2006; Jackson & Peterson, 2003; McCoach & Siegle, 2003
What positive or negative memories do you have of your child's education?	Get participants thinking about how they feel about school and to explore prior experiences	Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Grobman, 2006; Gross, 2006; McCoach & Siegle, 2003
What are your reflections on your child's experience growing up profoundly gifted?	Have participants reflect on their child's experiences as profoundly gifted.	Grobman, 2006; Jackson & Peterson, 2003; Silverman, 1990
When did your child's feelings and attitudes about school change or shift? How old were they when this occurred? Was there anything that may have caused this shift?	Have participants discuss and explore their child's period of underachievement	Grobman, 2006; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Speirs Neumeister & Hebert, 2003
What was your child's experience with the phenomenon of underachievement?	Prompt participants to discuss what occurred during their child's underachievement	Blaas, 2014; Diaz, 1998; Grobman, 2006
Do you feel that your child struggled to reach their academic potential due to external factors?	Prompt participants to discuss what occurred during their child's underachievement	Blaas, 2014; Diaz, 1998; Grobman, 2006

McNamara (2009) suggested eight useful principles for novice researchers preparing for interviews: “Choose a setting with little distraction; explain the purpose of the interview; address terms of confidentiality; explain the format of the interview; indicate how long the interview usually takes; tell them how to get in touch with you later if they want to; ask them if they have any questions before you both get started with the interview; and don’t count on your memory to recall their answers” (Preparation for Interview section, para. 1).

Interviews provide researchers with valuable qualitative data for understanding participants’ experiences, how they describe their personal experiences, and the meaning they derive from those experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Castillo-Montoya’s (2016) interview protocol refinement was the four-phase process followed to determine interview questions and construct the interview protocol. The interview protocol framework consists of four phases:

- Phase 1: Ensuring interview questions align with research questions,
- Phase 2: Constructing an inquiry-based conversation,
- Phase 3: Receiving feedback on interview protocols
- Phase 4: Piloting the interview protocol (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Researchers must remember that:

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions. ...At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. ...At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth. (Seidman, 2013, p. 9)

In-depth interviews occurred in person and via Zoom in various locations.

Researchers use interviews to “gather information regarding an individual’s experiences

and knowledge; his or her opinions, beliefs, and feelings” (Best & Khan, 2006). The open-ended interview questions provided the participants with the freedom to tell their stories in-depth (Best & Khan, 2006).

All interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. QuickTime Player or Voice Memos were the means used to audiotape the interviews so that each conversation could be transcribed and revisited for data analysis. All participants checked the executive summary generated by the researcher following each interview. Once participants verified the accuracy of their transcript summaries, data analysis began with a review of the transcripts and the creation of memos.

### **Data Analysis**

In phenomenology, analysis can be more or less structured (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) suggested following a structured method of analysis, which Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated should begin with disclosure by the researcher of personal experiences with the phenomenon. Analysis should include a list of significant statements grouped by the researcher into a broader collection of information, the creation of a description of “what” the participants experience, and then a draft of “how” the experience occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, researchers should write a composite description of the phenomenon to “explain the ‘essence’ of the experience” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 201).

The phenomenological analysis began with bracketing, or epoche. Researchers start the data analysis process with the following steps:

1. Horizontalizing, or listing all relevant expressions. Following the cleaning of all data, data that remain are the “horizons.” Horizons are the “textural

meanings or constituent parts of the phenomenon” (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015, p. 13).

2. Reduction of experiences to the invariant constituents, which entails clustering the horizons into themes (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015).
3. Thematic clustering to create core themes (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015), or what Moustakas (1994) called “core themes of the experience” (p. 121).
4. Comparison of multiple data sources to validate the invariant constituents (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015).
5. Construction of the individual textural descriptions of the participants (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015).
6. Construction of individual structural descriptions (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015).
7. Construction of composite structural descriptions (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015).
8. Synthesizing the texture and structure into an expression (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). This final step entails combining the composite structural description and the structural descriptions to “create a universal description of the phenomenon under investigation...to reach the essence of the experience of the phenomenon” (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015, p. 13)

Phenomenological researchers use a highly structured approach, drawing upon the data analysis procedure as a guide for an overall structure for analysis and, ultimately, the organization of the report (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The overall writing structure of a phenomenological study is similar to a traditional research manuscript with chapters (Moustakas, 1994). This study contains the six chapters suggested by Moustakas (1994): an introduction, statement of the topic, and outline; a review of the relevant literature; a



conceptual framework of the model; methodology; presentation of the data; and a summary with implications and outcomes. The final version of this study has a combined Chapters 3 and 4.

Data analysis began after the creation of transcripts of each interview. The researcher transcribed some interviews and sent others to a professional for transcription. Once completed, the transcripts underwent another review while listening to the audio recordings, creating memos to highlight important concepts and ideas that emerged while reading through the individual transcripts. Memos are a means to track the development of ideas throughout the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants received an executive summary of their interview—a short summary of the participants’ responses to each of the interview protocol questions—to review for accuracy.

Next, the researcher uploaded transcripts into NVivo, the qualitative software selected to support the data analysis process. NVivo was the organizational tool chosen for coding, filing, and other data analysis tasks, with files and nodes created before coding the interview data. Each transcript then underwent coding and organization into nodes. After the coding and organization into nodes, the next step was reflecting on the data to compare how participants experienced this phenomenon and beginning to determine the relationships between the collected data. The data collected through the interview protocol provided detailed reflections on how the participants experienced the phenomenon under investigation. The data analysis continued with an examination of the possible emergent themes, later represented in charts for the young adults and the parents.

### **Role of the Researcher: Bracket**

One of the key concepts in phenomenology is the need for the researcher to set aside or bracket any knowledge of the phenomenon under study. Bracketing is a process required to minimize bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher must bracket experiences of this phenomenon while being mindful that complete bracketing is not possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As mentioned in Chapter 1, this study is a result of personal experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. Underachievement is something with which the researcher's profoundly gifted children struggled during adolescence and continue to struggle with during young adulthood. Additionally, many of my children's peers have experienced periods of underachievement.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Several ethical issues merited consideration to protect the participants. The first step was obtaining approval from the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board. Prior to interviews, the participants received informed consent forms, which provided them with the necessary information and the voluntary nature of the participation. Pseudonyms replaced any identifying information related to the participants. All of the interview data and transcriptions remain stored in a secure location. To ensure accuracy, all participants reviewed executive summaries of their interviews.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented an overview and the rationale for the phenomenological research approach used to gather and analyze the data. Chapter 3 also included details of the research design. First, the chapter provided a short description of the interview pilot process, followed by the setting, participants, and recruitment and the data collection

process. Finally, the chapter presented the specific data analysis procedures and the researcher's role, ethical considerations, and limitations to this research study. Chapter 4 will present the data analyzed from participant interviews.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **Introduction**

This study was the means of exploring how five profoundly gifted individuals experience underachievement during adolescence. Parents of these five individuals also answered the interview questions to gain additional perspectives on their children's development and perceived underachievement. A qualitative phenomenological approach guided the data collection and analysis. The results are a culmination of the voices of participants who provided insight into their lived experiences.

Chapter four presents the lived experiences shared by each young adult and parent participant. This chapter includes the findings that emerged from the data collected through multiple interviews. The interview protocol provided a venue for rich descriptions of students' experiences growing up profoundly gifted and how the phenomenon of underachievement also played a role in their development. The chapter presents profiles of the five young adults and their parents, as well as the themes drawn from participants' interviews.

The purpose of this study was to examine, through the lived experiences of underachieving profoundly gifted adolescents, the contributing factors to underachievement. Personal interviews took place with five profoundly gifted individuals and their parents to understand how these young adults have experienced underachievement. This researcher sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are profoundly gifted young adults' reflections of their development during adolescence?
2. What are profoundly gifted young adults' perceptions of barriers and supports during adolescence?
3. What are parents' perceptions of their profoundly gifted children's development through adolescence?
4. What are barriers and supports for profoundly gifted adolescents as they move into adulthood?

### **Summary of Participants**

The researcher interviewed five profoundly gifted young adults aged 19 to 25 who lived in various locations throughout the United States. The parents of these individuals were interviewed as well to gain additional insight into the experiences of their profoundly gifted children's development. There were three female young adult participants and two male participants. Two of the participants are in their first years of college, one will graduate soon, and two participants elected to not complete college. Four of the participants' parents answered interview questions and provided additional information on adolescent development and underachievement.

Table 4.1: Participants

Young Adult	Age	Role	Parent
“Sandra”	Mid-20s	Young adult	“Janet”
“Johnny”	Early 20s	Young adult	N/A
“Steve”	Early 20s	Young adult	“Sophie”
“Courtney”	Late teens/early 20s	Young adult	“Allison”
“Hillary”	Late teens/early 20s	Young adult	“Barbara”

***Participant Profiles – Young Adult***

**Sandra – Young Adult.** Sandra is currently in her mid-twenties. Her family moved several times while she was young, but eventually settled in the western United States. Sandra had a mixture of school experiences, including private school, public school, homeschool, and early college.

**Early Years.** Sandra barely recalls her time in school. She enjoyed learning and fondly remembers studying many interesting things. Unfortunately, she also remembers massive amounts of pressure for everything I showed an interest in, anything that had the potential for a career that could make a lot of money...like being good at playing the piano; now I have to play Carnegie Hall someday.

When asked about early memories around learning and education, Sandra shared, “I liked to learn in the sense that I got to sit and read about stuff and look up stuff that I was interested in by myself.” Sandra enjoyed participating in math competitions; however, she thinks that was “more because it was one of the rare social outlets I had where I got to practice with other people on a team.” As she got older, her in-person

activities decreased and were replaced by online activities. “The Internet was the one thing that gave me any possibility of acting like a normal human being,” she said. “Being socialized on the Internet is not a good thing, but it’s better than nothing.”

*Growing Up Profoundly Gifted.* When asked to reflect on her experiences of growing up profoundly gifted, Sandra willingly shared her perspective. Although she was not sure of when she was identified, she believes that being identified as profoundly gifted is what “led to the decision to homeschool me for 7 years, which I think led to irreparable damage to my mental health.”

Sandra shared, “There were no social experiences. It was more important to ‘shut me up’ and teach me calculus than to teach me how to interact with people—which, as it turns out, isn’t important in the real world.” Further, Sandra stated that she “genuinely doesn’t know what profoundly gifted is supposed to mean” and expressed her belief that “IQ tests can be super racist and classist.” Additionally, she believes the profoundly gifted community to be a “very rigid, weirdly, cultish-like community” and the concept of profoundly gifted “is all an arbitrary weird scam.” She described the gifted community as

People being so obsessive about their kids. Bragging about things like, “Oh, my kid is in the sixth grade but reading on an eighth-grade level.” It creates an incredibly toxic community of people one-upping each other, just living out their dead fantasies on their poor children who didn’t even know better. It’s the reason so many gifted kids try to kill themselves.

This theme of profound giftedness as a toxic, cult-like experience was apparent in several of Sandra's responses. Sandra feels very strongly about the behaviors within the profoundly gifted community, which she said can be "abusive and controlling." She added, "Normal people don't homeschool their kids for a decade when [the kids] beg to go to school to have friends."

Sandra said she knew a lot of profoundly gifted kids who were inappropriately pushed by their parents. She described such kids as "all uptight until they hit the real world, and then it broke them." As a result of this pressure, she said, many profoundly gifted individuals engaged in substance abuse as an escape.

*Adolescence and Underachievement.* After attending a secondary school for profoundly gifted students, Sandra received acceptance into an elite university at an early age. Reflecting on her early college experience, she recalled, "I didn't think it would matter that I was poorly socialized. Going into academia, it would be fine. I'm smart enough and professors are usually eccentric, so I thought it will all end up being okay."

Instead of being fine, she "ended up flaming out of that, because no matter how smart you are, if you don't know how to be a person, you're not going to be able to succeed in school." Sandra began drinking, suffering from anxiety and depression as a result. She recalled,

I got drunk because I was so anxious, I couldn't do anything. I would pace back and forth in my room for an hour before working up the courage to go hang out with my friends in the lounge. These were people that I was actually reasonably sure liked me. Sometimes I would get drunk just to go to the grocery store or the



bank because I was terrified that something bad was going to happen and I was not going to know the right thing to do.

Aside from having poor social skills, Sandra related feeling she “just wasn’t good enough.” When reflecting on her experiences with underachievement, Sandra explained that she left college after a difficult first attempt, but then decided to return:

When I went back the second time, [just] like the first time, I technically passed my classes, but barely. I didn’t even have the passion for it anymore. I wasn’t sure if this is even what I wanted to do. My whole life had been pointing toward this; my entire future had been destroyed for this. It cost [me] my ability to connect with other people. So if I couldn’t do this, then what was I supposed to do? When I failed the second time, it just completely destroyed my sense of self. I figured I had to kill myself because there was nothing else to live for if I wasn’t going to be a mathematician.

***Reflecting and Young Adulthood.*** Sandra currently works in the tech industry. She feels she has been able to “undo some of the damage” that resulted from her childhood, she shared,

Honestly, it’s the most liberating thing of my life. I don’t have a degree from anywhere and I am sure that is going to be a problem, but for now, I am fortunate. I have a job as a programmer in the tech industry. I don’t really like the job or the tech industry, but it pays well and it’s one of those high-status STEM jobs. Turns out I was able to do that after all.

Additionally, Sandra reported that she now has a vibrant social life. She “went on a West Coast road trip last year, which is something that I never thought was possible for someone like me. ...Only people in books and on TV had those experiences, not real people.” She is currently involved in political organizing and union trainings. Sandra shared, “I don’t feel like I am underachieving and think that I have wildly overshot my expectations.”

Many things that come up in day-to-day life feel like milestones to Sandra. She shared having “moved recently from one apartment to another without needing to involve parents” and even booked a dentist appointment on her own. According to Sandra, in the past, there was “so much anxiety associated with doing the simplest things, and I just shied away from everybody.” Back when she “was involved in that profoundly gifted community,” she never thought her life would be this good.

Sandra does not doubt the importance of school; rather, she thinks it is vital, especially the socializing aspect. She wonders if her life would have been different if she had not been homeschooled during her primary school years. What she took away from her school experiences was that “being around a bunch of people helped shape me into an actual person.” Sandra described her high school as a “bunch of people who were in similar circumstances, so probably a slightly more forgiving environment in some ways than regular school.” Similarly, she recalled that her university had some “normal human beings, but they tended to be on the nerdier side, but it probably worked out better there than other places could have been.”

**Johnny – Young Adult.** Johnny grew up in a small suburban town until middle school, when his family moved out west. His family decided to move so that he could

attend a school for the profoundly gifted. The move was traumatic for Johnny, who struggled to adjust to his new home and school.

*Early Years.* Johnny loved primary school and having fun with all his friends. He recalled, however, being “kind of abnormal” from the beginning. When asked what he meant by that, he shared an example from preschool when he “wrote my name in order but with the bricks of an igloo.” After writing “great stories” in first and second grade, he recalled becoming arrogant beginning around second grade. Nonetheless, he had good relationships with teachers and was helpful with his classmates. Johnny related, “School was easy. I always did well and received candy for achievements. I seemed to know everything. It was a pretty rapid decline as I got older; there was no more candy for tests.”

Johnny loved everything about school in the Midwest except the homework. He stopped doing homework around the third grade, and by fourth grade, it had become a significant issue. He recalled how his fourth-grade teacher thought he was “kind of dumb” because he did not turn in his work and was constantly making excuses. “I was having fun and messing around with other students,” he said. “Fourth grade is when things changed. I just wasn’t doing the work anymore. I had no motivation to do anything.” Although fifth grade was better, his arrogance started to become a problem, and he ended up in the principal’s office. Johnny has fond memories of his social life in his early years, stating, “I loved the social aspects of school.”

*Growing Up Profoundly Gifted.* Growing up profoundly gifted was “nice, but schoolwork was torture to the extreme, and it was awful, a total waste of time.” Johnny had a lot of friends and people seemed to like him; however, his arrogance was an issue,

which he regrets. His classmates did not seem to notice at first, but then again, “No one told you that you were being rude when you are young.”

For Johnny, being profoundly gifted means that it is “easy to solve problems in a wide array of fields.” Johnny feels strongly that if he were more motivated, he could do “almost anything.” The problem is that he did not want to do anything. Additionally, he believes most people have unrealistic expectations of profoundly gifted people, noting, “Being profoundly gifted doesn’t mean that you will never make mistakes.”

*Adolescence and Underachievement.* According to Johnny, everything was great in the Midwest except for the academics. He remembers having a good social life at that time and being a star middle school athlete. Johnny stated that sixth and seventh grade were “paradise in hindsight,” even though his academic environment was poor.

After middle school, Johnny moved out west to attend a school for the profoundly gifted. For him, the term “gifted” was just a label, a descriptor or adjective that did not have a negative effect on him. Johnny did not care about anything when enrolling at his new school. Although the school was for profoundly gifted students like himself, he refused to make friends for the first two years because he wanted to return to the Midwest. He felt that “none of my new classmates were going to be substitutes for the friends I was missing; I just wanted to go home.”

The new school was more intellectually engaging, especially in writing, but he still did not want to do the work. Socially, the new school was not the same, as Johnny related, “These people were strangers, not the friends I had grown up with.” Moreover, he “definitely didn’t think that the trade-off of having strong academics and losing everything else was worth it.” He wanted to stay where he had grown up and attend the

local traditional high school, where everything and everyone was in one place. Johnny related that, at the time, he “didn’t care at all about the academics” and regrets not putting in more effort with some of his previous teachers.

***Reflecting and Young Adulthood.*** Johnny shared that his “whole life has been spent underachieving.” If he ever overachieved, it was to “impress a girl.” Johnny noted that “motivation and procrastination are still a real struggle” for him, and he believes he is underachieving at present. He explained that he “could be working three times as many hours” if he needed to.

Currently creating games and teaching kids, Johnny is content with things at the moment. Business consulting and creating games has been mildly successful. To him, underachievement in academics means not doing his work, which has been a real problem for some time. To illustrate this point, he told a story about an essay that he submitted during high school. “I turned in an assignment 19 days late and fought for the five percent that I was entitled to since it wasn’t 20 days late.”

Johnny has often doubted the importance of school, particularly because he does not see a need to attend college; he is already successfully working in the career of his choice. He dropped out of college a couple of times. After starting with several college credits, he just did not want to do it anymore. Johnny related that if he needs a degree later, he will likely be more motivated to complete college because there would be a point to it. He noted that expectations about what he should be doing or should have done had been irritating in the past but no longer bothered him.

Additionally, depression has been a serious issue, which Johnny said “held me back. If that hadn’t happened, I would have been able to do anything. I wouldn’t have

dropped out and would have written more.” He did not even care about the university writing class in which he had been encouraged to enroll. Johnny was disappointed that “students in college didn’t seem to care about the quality or authenticity of their work,” which made him question even more the point of being there. Ironically, students having little regard for anything bothered him. He stated, “Expectations were too low. Maybe if I had been at a more advanced school, things would have been different.” About school, Johnny admitted, “Motivation has always been a big problem. So much more would be possible with motivation; I would definitely be more productive.”

**Steve – Young Adult.** Steve is a 22-year-old male currently completing his final year of college. Steve had several different types of school experiences. He attended public school gifted programs, homeschool, high school online programs, and dual-enrollment.

*Early Years.* Early education was easy and enjoyable. Steve said he “just remembers that I never had to think about what I was doing; I was just skating through it for a long time. There were no difficulties with school, and I view that as positive.”

Steve did quite well in school, identifying it as a very good experience in early years. He remembers he liked to read for hours every day; he would “read for school and not for school; it didn’t matter.” Because Steve was reading above grade level, he was surprised to discover the expectations for the class, especially in fourth and fifth grade. He remembers the reading assignments having big text and short sentences, which was not at all like the full-length novels he had been reading on his own. This was a revelation to him: “I didn’t know that what I was reading was not what my peers were reading.”

Steve shared that he “would have friends here and there, but I didn’t really think about it a lot. I was really quiet and really shy for a long time.” He remembers during the early years wishing he could have connected more with his peers. He had wanted to talk to them but was unable to; he felt they were not sure how to talk to him, and he did not know what to say to them. He did, however, have positive experiences with his teachers.

Steve also recalls “getting annoyed at having to go over the same stuff over and over and being forced to do things that I already knew how to do.” He remembers thinking that he would much rather be reading at school whatever he was reading at home, rather than doing repetitive schoolwork.

***Growing Up Profoundly Gifted.*** Despite being identified as profoundly gifted at five or six years of age, Steve did not understand what that meant until around age 11 or 12. He said, “I realized I was a bit different or something but really didn’t know what was going on until quite later when my parents explained that I was profoundly gifted.” He was surprised at first, having he never thought of himself in that way. He explained,

Over time, life was frustrating because I felt like I was capable or should be capable of a lot more than whatever I was doing. But I would never do it and would never be able to. As school got harder, I did less and less well and it got more and more frustrating. I became aware of [being profoundly gifted] but did not feel that it was the reality I was experiencing at all. If I am so smart, then why is this so impossible for me?

It was difficult for Steve to make friends and maintain social connections, as learning how to do so did not come naturally. He shared that he would have to consciously alter his being to fit in with others.

I had to learn how to change myself and behave in order to have those kinds of friendships or relationships. It was hard to grow those naturally, and it was definitely isolating and lonely at times. Because it was so unnatural, it was definitely tiring because I did have to try hard to fit in and be different than I would normally be. It was tiring and bad for my sense of self because it forced me to abandon the things that were really interesting or mattered to me in order to do things I needed to do to fit in more.

In high school, Steve would ignore his schoolwork to focus on making friends. He said, “Once I did, I was less socially isolated, but I was behind in pretty much every other area of my life. I focused on one thing or the other.”

For Steve, being profoundly gifted means thinking about things in ways unlike most people. He said, “I look at the world differently, and I ask a lot more questions about a lot more things. I think it also means not necessarily fitting in easily.” Steve explained the difficulties of trying to fit, stating,

It’s hard to be yourself anywhere with any group of people. I found that when I would modify my behavior to fit the group. I would act differently and even speak differently and talk about different things. I wouldn’t go into things that I might be thinking about or interested in and would just try to fit in the group without conforming to whatever was going on. I would find friends that way, just change



myself to fit some group that I wanted to be around. It felt isolating. Even when I had friends or a circle of friends, I didn't feel very understood or able to express myself very much.

*Adolescence and Underachievement.* When asked about peer expectations, Steve replied,

For a long time, I didn't recognize peer expectations and I didn't care. I was just doing whatever, but I didn't have many friends. I would just read and do my own thing and not even think about it. The older I got, the more I noticed it and the more it influenced me.

Steve was in the International Baccalaureate program during high school. His course load expectations were much higher than they had ever been, as were the expectations for homework. Steve knew other students who were highly motivated, hard-working, and high achieving, yet he did not care at the time.

I was really unhappy and struggling with untreated ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder]. The course load was too much for me to handle, and I didn't really fit in because I wasn't really hardworking, motivated, or achieving. I felt like I should be doing more but didn't understand why I couldn't. Everyone else was doing better than me, and I was supposed to be gifted. I didn't feel like it at all.

Steve decided to return to the program despite not having friends, explaining, "I really wanted some kind of social environment." He was doing well in the online OLS

[high school] program because there were no social interactions and, therefore, no interruptions. He explained,

I work better on my own without distractions, better than in a classroom full of people. I work better in silence than with hearing a teacher. It was good, but I was socially isolated. I couldn't drive yet and didn't have a lot of friends to hang out with. It was difficult to make friends while at OLS, and I really wanted to have a social environment where I could go and meet people. I thought that would make me feel better. I was not feeling great at that time.

Steve went to several schools throughout the years; however, he believes that community college was the “best fit,” as his first term there was when things changed. He “felt like there was a place for me in higher education, a place that wasn't there in primary school.” The community college showed him how college classes were structured as opposed to high school courses. He preferred attending class a few times a week and then returning home to do homework. During his first year at the college, he took a course with a teacher who made a tremendous difference in Steve's life. He described this as “having a mentor and teacher that encouraged me and talked with me, made me feel like I could do something with my life and my education again.”

Intending to transfer to a university, Steve excelled at community college dual-enrollment. The community college allowed him to do more interesting and exciting things. Steve got a job as a tutor followed by his first position as a teacher's assistant, both through his new mentor. Although he was still without many friends his age—

actually, fewer than before—he had a strong connection with one professor. He has fond memories of his time with this professor.

He encouraged me to put more into my papers. He thought they were good but just knew that I could do much more. I had never had anyone say something like that, and it changed the way I looked at things and the effort I put into my work. It really encouraged and motivated me to work really hard on my papers. I would bring them to him and we would talk about what I had and work on revising and editing to make them even stronger. He worked with me a lot, and he became both professor/mentor and friend. He helped me get the job as a tutor and helped me get the teaching assistant position in his class and other classes. He really helped my confidence and helped me feel more like I was gifted in a way because someone recognized that the work I was doing was good and saw that I could do more and pushed me to. ...I had never had that before. He definitely gave me more confidence.

***Reflecting and Young Adulthood.*** Even after the significant attitude shift at the community college, underachievement was an easy pattern to fall back into. Steve explained that he had periods where he felt motivated and productive, but it was hard to sustain that motivation. When he was doing well academically, he felt he was “failing to accomplish things in the social areas of life,” an issue he believes is related to his underachievement.

Things changed, however, when Steve went away to college. He realized that he “wanted friends and social ties. I had worked really hard to get there, but I ended up

neglecting school again in favor of friends and social connections.” He had a very average year academically but a positive year socially, as he made a lot of friends and found the social experiences were valuable. Once again, he coasted through classes, performing “just mediocre, when I know I could have done well.”

He can only recall having his academic and social lives in sync one time. He was in a tough physics class at the university, where he made friends with the people in class through working and studying together. They were “friendships built on accomplishing what needed to be done for class.”

Steve has always had doubts about the importance of school. He explained, “By ‘always,’ I mean that the thought never escapes me, and I still have that feeling about college. I often feel like I am not learning anything, only doing what is needed to be done in order to get to the next educational milestone. The goal doesn’t seem to be about learning; it is about passing the assessments of what I am supposed to know. I know how to prepare for, study for, and take tests now. I can do all of that, but I feel like I really didn’t learn much at all.”

Steve feels that he has become more successful in school; however, he declared that “much of it was learning how to do well in college classes as opposed to learning new knowledge.”

Steve received a diagnosis and treatment for ADHD during his first year at the community college. He explained that ADHD was a big part of his struggle. The combination of difficulty with schoolwork and studying, in general, was a result of his ADHD and his difficulties with social skills impacted him. He shared,

After getting treatment, I had a really good year. It changed the way I experienced school. I wasn't able to sit through a class and follow what was going on and retain what was taught until I was treated for ADHD.

Steve believed that his first year of college was memorable because it was a new experience. He was meeting new people and learning new skills. The university was finally the place where "I would be able to show them what I am capable of; however I noticed rather quickly that it didn't really matter. All you needed to learn was how to pass the class." He felt that learning how to pass a class was more important than learning the course material. Steve lost some of the motivation he had gained at the community college. "There wasn't anyone examining what I was doing or pushing me to see my work. Only whether it met and passed standards. No one pushing me to do anything at all."

In particular, Steve was incredibly disappointed with his capstone project experience, which was his first serious research project. When he met with his advisor to discuss concerns about data, the advisor suggested that he pull data from Wikipedia. Steve said,

I realized that the project didn't really matter at all. I didn't pull data from Wikipedia. I chose to pick a source for data that I thought was reputable and serious and could be sourced and cited, but there was no pressure to do that. I could have created whatever I wanted and no one would have questioned it. It was really disappointing because research should be well planned, thought out, and executed. This research was not "authentic." It didn't feel like research at all.

Why bother doing research that would be completely meaningless? I feel like what I produced was meaningless. It would be hard to defend it against serious inquiries. It would be difficult to say that it was legitimate research and contributes to the existing body of knowledge.

Steve expressed that school is not necessarily the best way to reach the highest level of achievement, saying, “If that is going to be how my efforts in school are viewed and assessed, then I didn’t really feel like school was saying much about me or my achievements.” Additionally, Steve learned that more effort does not necessarily equal more achievement. He explained,

The long-term difference between getting a B in a class and getting an A felt small enough for me to have extra time and energy. I would rather spend the time making new friends or traveling or putting that free time into hobbies rather than studying for no compelling reason.

Steve believes achievement would mean that he is happy and has high professional earnings, which, to him, is important. Achievement would include “not needing to worry about external things like finances and all. I wouldn’t have the stressors so that I would be more flexible to learn, study, engage in the things that I enjoy.”

**Courtney – Young Adult.** Courtney is a 19-year-old female currently in her first year of college. She has been enrolled in both gifted and general education public school programs.

**Early Years.** Courtney was identified as gifted at four years of age, subsequently attending kindergarten in a full-time gifted program. During first grade, she moved to

another state that did not have a full-time gifted class. She was in a pull-out gifted program, but recalls disliking it:

I learned about [being gifted] because I hated going. I didn't want to go and my teachers had to make me go. I questioned why I had to go and my parents explained it more. I was then able to put two and two together. I didn't like going, and that never changed. I just had a concept that I was smarter than the other students, but it didn't have any meaning at 7 [years of age].

After moving back to her previous home from another state, she was once again enrolled in the full-time gifted program. There, she realized she was extremely intelligent, and it all started to make more sense. Her giftedness began to matter more in middle school. She was in regular classes; however, one of her teachers recognized how smart she was and suggested that Courtney was not in the right class. They switched her to the classes with all of the honors students, which Courtney felt was a better fit.

Overall, Courtney has positive memories about her education up until her junior year. She shared, "I never had any problems or issues. I could always do well doing less, like I said. I liked it. I liked school. Learning, specifically—I liked learning."

***Growing Up Profoundly Gifted.*** When asked about what it was like growing up as a profoundly gifted individual, Courtney explained,

I knew I was smarter because I had friends with the same aspirations. To get good grades, they studied and talked about how much they studied. I would get the maximum grades, which at the time was ridiculous, like 105 on a test. I would get the same scores but didn't study, and that's when I realized what it meant. That

was when I figured out that I could do the same as other kids while doing less than other kids. I got away with that throughout middle school and high school.

In general, although she was socially awkward, Courtney never felt she was too smart to interact with other people. She explained, “Academically, I was smart, but I could function just like anyone else, so in that aspect, it wasn’t really difficult.” For her, the biggest issue was social anxiety. Elementary school was the worst because her school had a lot of “mean girls” and she found it difficult to make friends. She shared feeling like “I was not the same as them, and I was just different. They didn’t want to be friends with me.”

Courtney shared a conversation she had recently had with her brother. He is extremely confident he is gifted, identifying an IQ score of 140 as a target.

He said that if you didn’t meet 140, then you cannot compete with his intelligence. I just don’t think of it that way. I think it’s just a number, and in my day-to-day life, it doesn’t really affect me. This is just how I have always been; it’s just who I am, and I don’t know the difference between being gifted and not being gifted. It’s just the way my brain works. I definitely don’t see myself as better than everyone. Not better: different.

***Adolescence and Underachievement.*** During her sophomore year, Courtney received the diagnoses of bipolar disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and panic disorder. She missed a lot of school during that year because of depression. She took medication for the depression, but her anxiety became severe toward the end of high school. She shared, “During my senior year, it was so bad, the panic attacks would keep



me from going to school.” Her anxiety would start the night before and build until the morning.

She hated going to school and missed a great deal of work; as a result, her grades fell. She recalled, “I couldn’t catch up on the make-up work, and it was just like a snowball effect. I almost didn’t graduate because I missed so much school and my grades were so bad.” Fortunately, she had done so well during her previous years that she was technically ahead. Thus, she was able to do poorly and still graduate with a decent GPA. She explained, “I didn’t have a really bad GPA. It was an average GPA; it just wasn’t as high as it once was. Because I had done so well previously, I was still able to graduate.”

Courtney shared that although nothing ever happened at school, it became her trigger. “The panic attacks started, and I just hated going to school. The doctors never figured out why.” She was already on a prescription for generalized anxiety disorder and kept trying different medications to control the panic attacks.

Courtney recalled, “School was always on my mind. It was like a constant panic and constant anxiety.” She explained that even when she managed to go school, she experienced constant anxiety. Sometimes the anxiety and panic attacks were so bad that she could not attend. She said, “If I did somehow stay, I would go to the nurse and sit there. Mom would have to come pick me up. I just couldn’t manage the anxiety.” She explained,

I think it was anxiety and shame in a way, because I knew that my grades were really bad and I always had good relationships with my teachers. I had always done well, and having bad grades made me upset. I was embarrassed about my grades, especially because the teachers would see me at school and I just couldn’t

catch up. Since I wasn't able to catch up, I was avoiding teachers so I would not have to have those kind of conversations.

Courtney said she had a couple of friends who did well in school:

We all went to high school together and, well, it wasn't a competition, but I think that, underlying everything, there was competition. I realized that they were doing better than I was because I didn't study, and I didn't want to. I could get away with not studying. They studied because they wanted to do better, and I didn't have any interest in competing anymore.

At some point, she felt the underlying competition was annoying and not worth the effort. Grades, she said, "didn't affect me. I don't have to compete or compare myself to other people's grades." When her anxiety was at its worst, she had to come to terms with the realization that her grades did not define her.

Courtney always knew that school was important. "My parents didn't have to tell me to get good grades; it was just something that I saw I could do, so that is what I strived for." When her grades started slipping because of her mental health issues, she said,

That is when I questioned how important grades were in school. I think it was just my excuse on coming to terms with having bad grades. It's because I thought they were important, and I still do, but I was trying to convince myself that it was okay to have bad grades because I didn't want to accept it.

She took only one class her first year in college but excelled in it. She recalled,

I got a super high A, so I realized that I am not dumb; I'm still smart and it was just something I went through. That was kind of when I came to peace that it was just a bad year and my life is not over. I'll be fine.

***Reflecting and Young Adulthood.*** Although Courtney is no longer anxious about school, reflecting on her previous experience, she thinks anxiety became a barrier to achievement. She feels fortunate for having teachers who cared for her and would try to help her. This attention was problematic, too, because she also did not want those teachers to think poorly of her when she was struggling. She shared,

I was never thought of as a stupid student. I was comfortable enough with a few teachers that I could say, "Hey, this is what I am going through." I think everyone was aware that I was just going through something that kept me from achieving.

Courtney believes that achievement is different for each person. Regarding herself, Courtney stated,

I know that I am capable of doing well, so if I am not meeting my capabilities, I am not really achieving. That doesn't mean I have to get A's; it's me knowing that I did the best that I could.

She also thinks that achievement requires one to be happy. She has some ideas about what she wants to do with her life, but none of it is rooted in wanting to be better than other people. She feels some people just want a prestigious job so that they can appear better than others; Courtney has no interest in that, as indicated by previously wanting to become a professional piercer. Her father told her she was "too smart for that,"

to which Courtney replied that just because she was born smart does not mean she has any obligation to do anything in particular. It bothers her that “society thinks, ‘Oh, you were born smart so you have to do a smart job.’ I think that can be a detriment sometimes.” Courtney, however, has never felt that way. She learned from her mother that she could do whatever she wanted, relating that “as long as I was happy doing it, I would be successful.”

Courtney also shared her thoughts on a link between giftedness and mental illness. She explained,

I can see it in myself, my dad, and my brother. I wouldn’t trade being mentally ill, and I can say that because my bipolar is managed, because in my day-to-day, it doesn’t really affect me. I wouldn’t trade it because I like being smart. I am aware that they go hand in hand. I also think that mental illness and creativity are linked and that is another reason I wouldn’t trade it...because of creativity.

**Hillary – Young Adult.** Hillary is a 19-year-old female in her first year of college. She grew up in a small town until middle school. At that time, the family moved to larger urban city for more appropriate schooling options. Hillary attended a private middle school for gifted students. She then continued on to attend a large public high school.

**Early Years.** Hillary remembers school being fun but not challenging, recalling that most of her “real” learning occurred at home, where her parents created an environment that encouraged learning. The family had a significant number of books and she loved to read. Hillary recalls asking her father numerous questions about how things

worked. In school, she did not have many close friends, yet reports being content with the acquaintances she did have.

She had both positive and negative memories of the gifted program in elementary school. Hillary resented being in the program because the expectations were higher. She said, “You couldn’t just coast, but I liked the people; they were really fun there.” During the early years, Hillary was close to her brother, who is also profoundly gifted; as such, she was not lonely because she always had him to play with.

***Growing Up Profoundly Gifted.*** When Hillary described what it was like growing up profoundly gifted, she recognized that her parents, particularly her mother, sought out social experiences for Hillary and her brother. She recalled, “We started going to yearly gatherings with other profoundly gifted families.” Hillary didn’t know if “there are other things quite like that, but even though they weren’t part of daily life, as a kid, I definitely recognized that that was a really cool bond.”

According to Hillary, being profoundly gifted seems to “throw more hurdles at you than benefits.” In discussing her thoughts on some of the difficulties, she noted,

I’m not sure about the term specifically, but I definitely know there’s a huge correlation being profoundly gifted and having Asperger’s traits or other issues with things such as executive functioning and just getting it together. I see that a lot in college, and I am surrounded by a lot of really smart people.

***Adolescence and Underachievement.*** Hillary moved to a new city for middle school, where she found time management to be a struggle. The school was a unique in that each student selected an area of focus and the teachers designed a unit around the choice each student made. Students would have to complete a project that covered all

academic areas. Hillary recalled choosing *Star Wars* as one of the units to study; however, although the projects were “really cool,” she struggled to complete them. She related,

A lot of the projects were about making things. I definitely didn't have the time management skills because I went to a public school for elementary school and they tell you everything to do: ...Go to math class...go to lunch. ...At the new school, they sort of give you 3 hours of general work time and say, by the end of the week, have a diagram or have an essay. I did not have any of those skills, but the people were really cool. I was totally thrown into this great number of fantastic peer relationships and didn't really get anything done the time I was there.

Hillary remembered that two thirds into the year, she would rush to prepare for the project fair they had every spring. For her, it was always the worst time because she did very little the rest of the year:

I would scramble the week before to put together a trifold that had some BS project. It always amazed me because they didn't have grades. I only threw it together because of the social humiliation of having something to show at the fair. I'm not really sure how well or poorly I was doing, but I don't think I was really pulling it off.

Near the end of eighth grade, Hillary's school said she had failed to complete enough work to graduate in 3 years, as she had intended. She chose to drop out and homeschool the remainder of the year. She said, “I knew I was ready to go to high school.

The only thing I was losing was that I couldn't do the graduation ceremony with them and I didn't care."

Hillary identified the new school as an expensive school in the middle of the city where the students came from wealthier families. She recalled,

There was this attitude that you had to have cool sneakers, a fancy expensive watch, and the latest phone, so I didn't really bond with a lot of those people. But there were a lot of really quirky people because they provided some scholarships. Not all of the culture was bougie, uppity kids; there were a lot of people that didn't have that attitude and made friends with the people who were just willing to be goofy.

Hillary reported being fortunate to have attended a top-tier public high school with extensive resources and teachers who were "unusually good." Although her high school did not have a formal gifted program, school administrators created a website to connect students with a counselor assigned specifically to work with gifted students. In doing so, however, school administrators failed to realize that, by not making the chat anonymous, they had outed all the gifted students, at least to each other. Hillary recalled,

All of a sudden, all of the gifted kids knew who each other were. I think you could already sort of figure out socially who they were, but now it was explicit. They changed it real quick, but by then we had already created a large group chat and it sort of evolved into making a fictional country. It became sort of wild and comedic and really fun.

During high school, Hillary also encountered issues because she thought it would be “cool to sort of hate school.” She explained,

I thought it was the cool thing to do. But the truth is, I enjoyed it. Even in high school, I really enjoyed it and enjoyed the opportunity to just socialize with people at lunch. I totally loved all of my classes. When I had a bad teacher, I would just change out of that class and then would have a good teacher. I absolutely enjoy learning things.

Hillary admitted that she never completed homework in high school because it did not count toward her grade, but she would do well on the finals. Hillary shared her feelings about rebelling in high school:

I think the reason that I could never really do any homework or I would skip classes is that I was really frustrated with the lack of freedom I received from my parents. In hindsight, that probably wasn't a great reason to do poorly in school, but I was just annoyed at my parents all the time. There was a lot of rebellion. I felt like I couldn't do well in school until I had more freedom from them as a person. Even though it's not a direct correlation, that's just how I felt. I never really got [freedom] until college and I think it does help.

***Reflecting and Young Adulthood.*** During her first semester in college, Hillary failed a philosophy course. She reported,

During finals week last quarter, I was thinking about how I was going to pull it all together. I was going to have to fail this class so I was trying to figure out what was going on so it wouldn't happen again. Sometimes I just can't sit down and do



the work. I remember the last 3 weeks of the last quarter, I would sit down and be like, “All right, I have to write these three essays.” I just had to write three essays. The entire class grade was just the three essays. I just had to write, but it was dependent on a bunch of reading. I don’t know why, but every time I would sit down to do something, it just wouldn’t happen. I would sit at my desk for four hours and there’d be nothing done. That’s usually been the hurdle.

Hillary said that she rarely feels pressure or stress, which she thinks is an issue, especially when a deadline is approaching.

Hillary did not want to go to college, but she could not come up with a good enough argument to raise with her parents so she went anyway. Hillary said,

I have been picking classes that are fun. When I go to class, it’s because I enjoy them; I want to hear what you know and learn. My major is creative writing. I’m not going to make any money, but I just totally enjoy learning. Half the time when I am distracted from school, it’s because I am researching something else. I have a whole binder of notes that I’ve taken that are not for school or anything, but just because I’m interested in those topics and want to know about them. I can spend hours just researching stuff.

Hillary attributed earning poor grades in philosophy class to a very “petty reason”: She was not interested in the reading assignments. She found the classroom discussions interesting but had no interest in the reading. This is when she decided to change her major from philosophy to creative writing.

Hillary feels that she tends to take a practical view of things. Although her parents have high expectations for her, she is content and believes she is starting to figure things out, including how to manage her time. Hillary expressed that she has “become pretty good at diagnosing why I’ve messed something up and how to do it better.”

### *Participant Profiles – Parents*

**Janet – Parent of Sandra.** Janet and her husband grew up as friends in another country and both separately moved to the United States to attend college. After college, Janet and her husband reconnected, got married, and started a family. They had two daughters whom they subsequently found out were profoundly gifted. When her children were young, the family moved several times due to the demands of graduate school and employment. When their oldest daughter, Sandra, was in elementary school, Janet’s family moved to a location with a wide range of appropriate resources for her giftedness. Later, the family settled in a Western state where she enrolled Sandra in a school for profoundly gifted students.

Janet described her family as laidback because they “like hanging out with each other.” When asked about early learning, Janet recalled the behaviors and reactions to Sandra during her preschool and primary years. She remembered that, in preschool, her daughter did not focus during circle time, and she always pursued her interests: “reading books, lots of books, and not doing what the other children were doing.” The teachers misunderstood Sandra’s behavior and suggested that she might be academically delayed. Janet and her husband were taken aback and asked the teachers if they realized that Sandra could count in three or four languages, could write her name, and could spell. She shared that the teachers “had no idea, but that was when they realized that there was

something different about Sandra. They only realized it because of the reactions of other people.”

Sandra began primary school at an international private K-12 institution. The school had a language immersion program, which worked well for Sandra, who chose French as her language of immersion. Halfway through the school year, the teachers suggested that Sandra take a second language of immersion, as she needed more challenging studies. At the end of the year, the school called in the family for a conference to discuss the next steps for Sandra. The educators conducted testing to determine her grade level for the next school year. To everyone’s surprise, Sandra placed at the end of middle school. Based on the results of their assessment, the school provided two options: to accelerate her to high school or homeschool. Sandra was completing the first grade. Neither option seemed viable, so Janet and her husband decided they would finish out the last 6 weeks of school homeschooling while they packed up and moved out West.

It was not until Sandra’s parents moved West did they begin to understand the extent of their daughter’s giftedness. Janet shared that, in her country of origin, there is no such term as profoundly gifted. She said, “There was no such thing as an innately profoundly gifted person. People were either smart or dense—it was that black and white. The real smart kids had to work hard.”

Janet shared some of the difficulties created by Sandra’s asynchrony. Janet reported that Sandra came home from school one afternoon, “just falling apart, as was often the case during those years.” According to her mother, Sandra was 6 years old when she said,

“Sometimes I feel like an adult, and sometimes I feel like a 2-year-old.” I said, “You know you are neither.” She looked at me with tears in her eyes, totally frustrated, and said, “Mom, you don’t understand; I am both.” That was a defining moment for us.

According to Janet, during that period, not attending a physical school started to become a problem. Sandra was involved many activities with their local homeschooling group. She participated in art lessons, Chinese school, Girl Scouts, and math competitions. Janet relayed that these enrichment activities replaced the social interactions that Sandra needed. Around age 11, Sandra began asking to attend school. At that point, the family started considering the option of moving for Sandra to attend a school for profoundly gifted students. In retrospect, Janet thinks that Sandra is resentful about the homeschooling years.

Things should have improved after the relocation to another state. However, according to Janet, the expectations for the students at the new school were too high. She stated,

From the beginning, the expectations for the students were to essentially do something that no one has done before, something to advance society. I was quite startled by the expectations. It seemed as though the normal achievements, such as doctor or lawyer or scientist, or other professions that you would consider to be at the top, well, those didn’t seem like they would be good enough. The bar was set really high, and anything short of where they set the bar was a failure. This

made me rethink our decision because here was a child that wanted to fit in, and they were saying that you are not supposed to fit in. It really bothered me.

Janet believes there is an unjust burden put on profoundly gifted kids to achieve at the highest levels. She said, “It’s almost like these kids were set up to fail, because no matter what they did, unless they did what nobody has done before, they [had] underachieved.” Janet stated that she believed that some of the expectations cause the feelings of imposter syndrome to intensify, making the children think, “Am I really who all these people think I am?” Janet said, “I think that all of this terminology of underachievement just tends to emphasize [imposter syndrome]...and makes them feel more and more like an imposter.” She suggested that too much pressure is put on these kids, requiring the adults to monitor and temper that pressure because they already put pressure on themselves.

Janet reported that her daughter struggled with emotional pressures during adolescence. She said, “Emotional pressures can be a bit overwhelming for someone who doesn’t have the tools to be able to deal with the issues.” Janet continued, “Depression and anxiety started to become an issue, and, of course, the concept of being an imposter.” Sandra had set unrealistic expectations for herself. Janet shared that when Sandra was taking university math courses at an early age, she tended to compare herself to others who were 8 to 10 years older. Janet reported,

When math was no longer intuitive and needed effort, self-confidence became an issue because Sandra thought that as a profoundly gifted person, she should just

know how to do the math and should not have to work so hard at it or need to study.

Janet shared her belief that profoundly gifted kids internalize unrealistic expectations.

Janet does not think that Sandra's desire to succeed has changed. What has changed is her self-confidence and the concept that she can achieve. Janet shared,

She wanted to do well, but she didn't have some of the tools that she needed to do well. Quite frankly, she didn't need a lot of skills when she was younger, and [then], she did. ...So what [did] that mean—that she is no longer special? Expectations are created by other people that are difficult to achieve. Profoundly gifted kids have their own set of expectations. This can only lead to self-disappointment and disillusionment.

Janet has seen tremendous growth in Sandra. Sandra has always struggled to form friendships, but she has been able to create a healthy social life for herself as a young adult. Janet stated,

I think that her asynchrony resulted in her social-emotional [skills] never really catching up to the academics. That is where I have seen tremendous growth, and I am really proud of her. She can now live in a world alongside people who are not profoundly gifted. Any school that has an educational program for profoundly gifted kids needs to have that aspect in mind also, you know, like back in kindergarten learning to spread the peanut butter on the bread.

**Sophie – Parent of Steve.** Sophie, the mother of two profoundly gifted young adults, grew up and raised her children in an idyllic rural setting. Her son, Steve, was 6 or 7 years old when they left their southern town to relocate out West. Sophie loves to spend time outside gardening and exercising when the weather is good.

When her children were young, they lived on a family property and had wonderful outdoor experiences. She explained,

They got to play in the dirt, they got to climb trees, they got to build dirt dams and pour water on them...they had zip lines, treehouses, playhouses, campfires, and lots of outdoor time. Look, I think it was a good place to be when you're little, and you're not looking at the school environment.

Steve had serious issues with separation anxiety during childhood. Sophie reported that her son was “anxious from birth” and “never wanted to be away from her.” He was a happy child as long as he was with his mother.

Sophie described her memories of Steve's early learning. She recalled that he was “wicked fast to pick up on things.” He began kindergarten in the public school's Gifted and Talented program. Sophie recalled it was not an optimal setting, and that she and her husband knew that they would need to get involved in whatever educational options they could put together. She and her husband knew that it was going to be a challenge to keep Steve interested and engaged in learning. Steve struggled with separation and disliked school.

Sophie recalled never being able to go far from home because she would usually receive a call from the school that she needed to pick up Steve. Asthma was a big issue

that caused additional complications during that period. Steve's early classroom experiences were ideal because his teachers were warm and nurturing and taught small classes. Sophie restated that he never wanted to be at school, so when she decided to homeschool Steve's older sister, it made sense to homeschool him, as well.

Educators in Steve's school district identified him as an artistically talented student, and the school provided him with pull-out art programs. When Steve was in third grade, they moved West for his sister to attend school, but Sophie continued to homeschool Steve for another year. By fourth grade, Sophie felt like there was a need for a change. She said, "Wearing the mom and teacher hat just wasn't working anymore." According to his mother, Steve was not an independent learner, which made homeschooling a challenge. When he began fourth grade, Sophie enrolled Steve in a school with a program for highly gifted students. It was an excellent environment, without much change, with a wonderful teacher who understood him. Steve had the same teacher for 3 years and felt comfortable with her but still would rather have been at home.

Intellectual and social differences continued to be areas of difficulty. Sophie and her husband decided to apply for Steve to attend the same program that his sister was pursuing. The specialized program was for educating profoundly gifted learners. In retrospect, Sophie felt that it was a "horrible environment for him, but there just were no other options. ...It was bad."

When asked about her thoughts and reflections of Steve growing up as a profoundly gifted child, Sophie recalled very few individuals who were close to his level. She reported that he struggled with imposter syndrome, and he questioned his giftedness. She went on to share, "He grew up feeling like a Martian because nobody else in [his]



tribe [was] around. ...He was [a] quiet and sensitive boy [who] stood out for a number of reasons.”

Sophie shared that her son’s attitude about school started to improve when he entered a dual-enrollment program with the local college. She related, “Steve absolutely never wanted to go to school, no matter the type of environment we tried [to provide],” yet he did want to go to school for the social experiences. According to Sophie, her son tended to be a follower and ended up befriending a “less-than-desirable crowd whose lack of motivation really underscored his lack of motivation.”

While away at college, Steve struggled in many ways and required more time to “figure things out in terms of school.” By the end of college, he expressed his desire to have a “do-over,” because he had learned so much about himself during his four years at school. Sophie does not think anyone ever told Steve he was a “stupid or lazy” student, but she certainly felt like he received that message. Unfortunately, Sophie believed that there were inadequate resources for supporting struggling students at his university.

Steve’s underachievement peaked in high school. Steve did not find the classes particularly interesting, and he was not sure about his true passions. Sophie conveyed that her son is a very creative person, so she tried to encourage him to participate in activities such as music, but he did not seem motivated by anything. Steve struggled during high school with anxiety and depression, which made school a more challenging experience. Reflecting on her son’s periods of underachievement, Sophie recalled that he started to underachieve in middle school. Although the school was an institution for educating profoundly gifted learners, the environment was not a positive one for Steve. Sophie shared that there were “very high expectations, [and] everyone was super smart [and]

taking college classes at very young ages.” Steve did not enroll in college classes, and he felt inadequate in comparison.

According to Sophie, Steve struggles with deadlines and planning. Sophie said, He would [have] love[d] to be a straight-A student, just like in elementary school, but there [were] so many components to be met, and his grades never reflect[ed] the amount of work he [did], the amount of information that he retain[ed], or anything else. I [kept] telling him that [grades] are completely artificial constructs and that school [was] not made for people like him.

Sophie’s son endured several disappointments related to school. She relayed that Steve felt disappointed about many things during his education, such as “missed deadlines, unsecured internships, and campus jobs—they are all huge failures in his mind.” According to Sophie,

He just never works to the level that he wants to work. As a parent, I have never been as hard on him as he is on himself. He has really high expectations for himself, and when he doesn’t meet them, I know he feels terrible.

Sophie believes that Steve is much more resilient now but that he still spends too much time berating himself. She explained that she tries to encourage him to reframe each situation and “view it from another angle.”

Sophie shared that she believes her son’s experience is reflective of what is known about underachievers: “There are so many factors working against them that it takes extraordinary effort on their part to achieve what they would be able to achieve if they didn’t have all the difficulties.” She explained that Steve tended to “compare himself

to other profoundly gifted individuals who were able to do extraordinary things seemingly effortlessly, and [he would] wonder, ‘Why not me?’”

**Allison – Parent of Courtney.** Allison was born in the U.S. Midwest but lived her entire childhood in the South. She loves to spend time with her four teenage children, particularly her oldest daughter, Courtney, whom she described as “attached to me at the hip and does whatever I do.” Courtney was identified as gifted at age four.

Allison recalled that Courtney had positive early education experiences. Everyone seemed to love her, although it was evident that she was “not normal” as early as preschool. According to Allison, Courtney was smarter than the other students in her preschool class. She explained, “When her classmates would get out puzzles, they would leave a mess whenever they got frustrated and couldn’t put them back together. Courtney would put them all back together, which was shocking to her teachers.”

When Courtney began kindergarten, she attended the full-time gifted program, which her mother recalls was a “double-edged sword.” Although Courtney did well with a class of her peers, it was also a very competitive environment. She did not do well with others during her early years in elementary school, as the competitiveness hurt her self-esteem. Later, when Courtney attended general education classes, she regained her confidence and self-esteem and found that she was the smartest student and at the top of her class. Allison shared that Courtney “definitely didn’t have to work hard and skated through school without having to put in any effort.”

Allison and her husband were laid back about their daughter’s giftedness. She said, “I have other children, so I never wanted to make her stand out. ...I don’t think we applied pressure. We never had to.” The only time Courtney’s giftedness became an issue

was when they enrolled her in the full-time gifted program to avoid attendance at their zoned school. During middle school, Courtney was annoyed when educators pulled her out of class to work with the teacher assigned to manage the gifted students.

Allison did not recall any negative experiences with school until Courtney's junior year of high school. Courtney had always done well and behaved and was well-liked by all of her teachers. Allison mentioned that her daughter had better relationships with her teachers than with other students, but as far as she knew, they were always positive experiences. Allison stated that Courtney never had to exert even a moderate amount of effort toward school, yet always received As. She appreciated that her teachers thought highly of her, but she never wanted to compete. Allison stated,

She actually liked that she didn't have to put in any effort. She thought the other kids were crazy for the extreme effort they demonstrated. For Courtney, that was never going to happen. Why do all that when you can still get an A? "Why would I do that?" It wasn't really in her.

During her junior year, however, her grades started to drop due to anxiety, depression, and a significant drop in effort. Allison stated that Courtney started to notice that when she did not put in effort, she could no longer achieve academic success as easily. Toward the end of her junior year, she had a lot of absences, which caused her grades to slip even further. Allison recalled,

At the end of her junior year, she ended with Bs, so it was still fine. She just wasn't where she was before. ...She wanted to have the "senior experience" and decided to return for her senior year. [Courtney had initially intended to graduate

at the end of her junior year.] She was saying that it was going to be different, that she was going to be involved and all...and then school started, and that is not what happened at all. ...By the end of the year, she had accumulated so many absences that she almost didn't graduate.

Courtney's anxiety was more of a problem than her depression. According to Allison, Courtney felt overwhelmed by and struggled to manage her anxiety. She recalled,

There were times [when] I would drive her to school, and we would pull up in front of the building, and she would just start to cry hysterically and refuse to get out of the car. If I forced her to go, I would receive a call from the nurse 2 hours later to come and pick her up because she was still hysterical. Medication didn't even seem to help. We couldn't figure out what part of school was creating so much anxiety. She ended up staying home and in bed, so she ended up with horrible, horrible grades.

Allison shared that the failure to achieve in school had a profound effect on her daughter. She believed that Courtney always made assumptions about her academic future, and when she was no longer the top student of her class, it really "rocked her." After that, the college admissions fallout began when she was unaccepted by colleges where she had previously been accepted.

When asked to share any external factors that may have affected her daughter's achievement, Allison said,

I don't know if it is a factor, but I would say that her limited options in high school may have had an impact. The rural school didn't have a lot of options, and

so she got pigeonholed into taking certain classes because there weren't a lot of options for her. If we had stayed in a community with better options, that [might] have helped.

Allison felt that her daughter lacked the social part of the high school experience, as Courtney has always struggled with friendships. Allison was not sure her daughter's lack of friends was related to being gifted. At her age, she should have been out being "irresponsible," but she has never had any of the typical teen experiences. Courtney always related better with adults than she did with her peers.

Allison has no idea what triggered her daughter's severe anxiety episodes; however, Courtney appears to be doing better. She did well with her first class in college last semester, but she only took one class. She is taking more classes this term. Courtney's parents encouraged her to schedule all of her classes on the same days. Allison says that she occasionally sees "glimpses of her not wanting to go again." Recently, Courtney has missed some classes without any logical explanation. Allison says she is "monitoring the situation."

**Barbara – Parent of Hillary.** Barbara is originally from the Midwest. She taught middle school and high school in a small mountain town until it became clear that educators from the local school system could not accommodate her profoundly gifted daughter. As the academic needs of their children grew, Barbara realized they would need to move to find appropriate educational options.

After her daughter was born, Barbara soon realized that the milestones from the *What to Expect* book did not match what she experienced with Hillary. She added that

she had no idea that her daughter was unusual because, from her perspective as a new mother, she thought Hillary exhibited typical behaviors. “Playing chess at 2 [years]” was not an unusual thing in her family; besides, Barbara’s two closest friends in the mountains had children with similar abilities.

Hillary was identified as gifted in third grade. During this time, Barbara attended her first gifted conference, where she met an expert in the field who suggested she have her daughter evaluated. Hillary’s profoundly gifted score after a couple of levels of testing was difficult for Barbara to hear. She said,

After she had been evaluated, and they came back with that [profoundly gifted score [of] five-plus standard deviations, I burst into tears and thought, “Oh my god, this is a whole new game.” It was somewhat traumatic but informative.

Although Hillary had done well academically in the early years, she spent much time in the principal’s office for “excessive talking.” Barbara said,

She loved teachers when they were authentic and connected with her through humor. I really enjoyed those teachers, too. Teachers who were strict and didn’t want to answer questions of hers because she always had the next-level questions, she did not have a lot of patience for them. She doesn’t suffer fools.

By the time Hillary entered fourth grade, Barbara knew that they would have to “make a drastic change.” The middle school in their small town was not a good fit for her daughter. Homeschooling was also not an option. Barbara and her husband decided that the best route for their family was to move so their children could attend a school for gifted learners. They submitted applications, and both of their children were accepted.

Barbara shared that she believed that her daughter's smaller physical size caused some of her issues. She said, "She was always in trouble. With an early Fall birthday, she was the youngest, and teachers would usually chalk up the issues to her age. She was tiny until about seventh grade. She looked at least 2 years younger." Hillary still used a booster seat in fifth grade.

Barbara believed her daughter had great experiences at the private gifted school until the eighth grade. She described that year as when "her great levels of underachievement began, where she simply wouldn't do anything." Those are hard memories for Barbara, because Hillary's underachievement resulted in her dropping out with only a few months left in her final year at the school. As a result of that experience, Barbara conducted research to determine whether Hillary required evaluation for an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis. Hillary ultimately received a diagnosis of high-functioning autism or Asperger's. Hillary chose to accept the diagnosis so she could obtain an individualized education program during her public high school years.

High school "was up and down"; however, Barbara shared that it was "not nearly as rocky as middle school." Overall, she thought her daughter had a pretty good childhood. Autonomy stood out as a trait Barbara believed her daughter has battled to obtain. She shared,

I think she would say she had a good childhood, although she would probably talk about being oppressed. In high school, she talked about [that], when she was in preschool, she wanted to be a teenager because she thought teenagers got to do whatever they wanted. When she was a kindergartener, she thought that she was a teenager. She was disappointed.



Barbara recalled that Hillary began underachieving halfway through her eighth-grade year. Puberty was a factor, as were the usual struggles of twice-exceptional students. Hillary shared with her mother that she wished she could have begun the private school in kindergarten or first grade so she could have internalized the self-driven mindset of others at her school. For Hillary, traditional public school was a very different experience, where “you are given the hoop to jump through, and then you play the game.”

Barbara shared that high school was a difficult time; however, being focused on herself caused Hillary to grow and have a better understanding of herself. Barbara felt that Hillary could have used more support than what she received. As a gifted teacher herself, Barbara understands the limitations of teachers, yet she noticed that her daughter did well when she connected with the teachers and received differentiated lessons. In that respect, Barbara said that teachers who did not provide inspiration, challenge, and support disappointed Hillary.

## **Connection to the Research Questions**

### ***Research Question 1***

What are profoundly gifted young adults’ reflections of their development during adolescence?

The five young adults interviewed for this study shared their thoughts on development during adolescence. All spoke extensively about the external and internal expectations they experienced daily. Rebellious experiences and attitudes were evident through the conversations, as were difficulties with social interactions. Some participants mentioned feelings of resentment, primarily from what they perceived to be the cost of

being profoundly gifted. Finally, mental health struggles have presented significant issues for each participant. The experiences shared indicated the extent of this impact.

**Expectations.** All five young adult participants reflected on the expectations they experienced during adolescence. These participants expressed differing views about the impacts of internal and external expectations on their development. Expectations of profoundly gifted adolescents have far-reaching, long-term implications. Some of the struggles shared show the significant impact of expectations on adolescent development.

*Internal Expectations.* All of the young adult participants addressed the expectations that they set for themselves. The participants indicated that they had internal expectations for what they felt was most important. These were authentic and unique expectations because they showed what each participant personally valued.

Discussing her expectations, Sandra expressed disappointment as she recalled the tough experiences of not living up to her self-imposed expectations. Those experiences had a negative impact on her for years. Sandra had always assumed that she would achieve at a high level. However, when things did not work out as she expected, life became difficult to manage.

Hillary shared a different experience with her internal expectations. She stated that she was not concerned with completing things that others considered important. She usually has to convince herself logically of the importance of a particular task she needs to complete; otherwise, there was no pressure to meet expectations.

Steve shared some of his thoughts on not living up to his internal expectations. He said,

Over time, I was frustrated because I felt that I was capable of more, but I was never able to reach my goal. As school got harder, I became more aware of the fact that I was supposed to be able to achieve, and that was not the reality I was experiencing at all. If I am so smart, then why is this so impossible for me?

Courtney shared that she knew what she was capable of, and that had become her standard. She explained:

I always knew that school was important without anyone having to tell me. I always wanted to do well, [and] my parents didn't have to tell me to get good grades. It was just something that I knew I could do, and so that is what I would strive for.

***External Expectations.*** Participants shared their experiences with perceived external expectations during adolescence. Sandra discussed how expectations could be overwhelming at times. She explained,

I felt massive amounts of pressure [in] everything that I showed interest in that may have showed any potential for a career, anything that would make money...like being good at playing piano, it would then be suggested that I play Carnegie Hall someday.

Courtney had some nonconventional ideas about what she wants to do in the future. She said that one day she told her father that she would like to be a professional piercer. He immediately responded that she “was too smart for that.” Courtney did not

like that answer and felt upset by it. She went on to say that she feels no obligation to have a “smart job” just because she is a “smart person.”

Johnny felt that others had imposed unreasonable expectations on him. He recalled the times when his peers had those unreasonable expectations. He shared that he was always supposed to be the “smart guy” who could never slip; however, he feels pressure because, he said, others are “just waiting for you to make a mistake.”

Hillary also discussed her school experiences. When she entered a private middle school, she quickly discovered that expectations were significantly higher than her previous school. The expectations of the school required more than Hillary wanted to give. She also relayed her awareness of her parents’ high expectations for her; however, she felt content figuring things out on her own and said that she “does not care to meet my parents’ expectations.”

Several participants shared experiences of having teachers with either high expectations or virtually none at all. Although low expectations from professors and teachers could produce negative issues, supportive teachers often resulted in greater achievements. Steve spoke about a professor who later became his mentor and friend. His professor encouraged him, raised the expectations for his writing, and motivated him to do better. Steve shared:

The experience changed the way I looked at things and the effort that I would put in. Although my papers were fine, he knew that I could write stronger papers and challenged me to do so. I worked really hard on those papers, and my writing really improved.

All participants expressed the common sentiment others' expectations of them felt higher than what was standard, which they found to be quite unfair.

**Rebellion.** Each participant recalled feeling rebellious toward societal expectations and authority. The young adult participants directed their rebellion toward authority or society, or in some cases, both. Rebellious attitudes toward teachers were problems for some of the participants. Johnny shared an encounter during middle school when he engaged in a verbal confrontation with one of his teachers. From his perspective, the teacher was unkind and did not like him. He said:

We were doing rockets at the end of the year, and while I was talking to my friend, the teacher skipped over my name. She was going in alphabetical order, and she just skipped my name. At the end of the list, I got up and told my friend she skipped my name, so I'm going to get my rocket. She said, "No, I didn't forget it. I skipped it because you weren't paying attention, and you didn't notice." I said, "If I didn't notice, then how come I noticed when the names were stated alphabetically? So I guess I was paying attention, huh?"

Participants reported power struggles, with rebellious attitudes having an impact on their development.

Courtney shared that she has various ideas about what she wants to do with her life, but she does not base any of them on trying to be better than other people. She said, "Some people think you have to have a fancy job or do fancy things because they want to impress [others], but that's not at all what I am interested in. There was a point in time [when] I seriously thought about being a professional piercer, but

my dad said that I was too smart for that. I was just born smart, but that doesn't mean I have to do anything in particular. I think that is one thing that society thinks, "Oh, you were born smart, so you have to do a smart job." It's detrimental.

Some of the participants reported intense conflicts with authority. Whereas Johnny had confrontations with teachers, Hillary reported that she had serious battles with her parents over her lack of freedom. She reported having many verbal battles with her mother when she felt her autonomy was in jeopardy. Hillary believes things are better now that she has the space and freedom to discover herself.

**Mental Health.** Mental health issues had an impact on these five young adults. Several participants relayed their experiences with anxiety. Sandra suffered extreme anxiety during college. Her heightened state of anxiety led her to engage in harmful behaviors in an attempt to quiet her sense of overwhelming fear. She said,

I started drinking just to deal with the anxiety and depression. I was so anxious [that] I couldn't do anything. Sometimes, I would pace back and forth in my room for an hour, working up the courage to go hang out with my friends in the lounge, people that I was actually reasonably sure liked me. I drank to go to places like the bank and the grocery store because I was terrified. ...I just thought something bad would happen and everybody would know that I didn't know the right things to do.

As a result of her anxiety and depression, Sandra struggled to succeed during her first semester. The experience had a significant, negative impact on her self-esteem.

Upon reflection, Sandra expressed that she felt she had devoted her life to the pursuit of attending an elite university and a career in academia. She explained,

My whole life was about working toward something, and my whole future had been destroyed for it. My ability to connect with people was destroyed for [an education and career]. When I failed at being successful in school the second time, it completely destroyed my sense of self. I figured I had to kill myself because there was nothing else I [had] to live for if I [could not] be a mathematician.

Sandra spent several years recovering from that dark period.

Courtney also reported struggling with mental health. She endured periods of extreme anxiety during adolescence. Her prolonged bouts resulted in severe underachievement during her final years of high school. She described her battle, which began her junior year:

My anxiety got so bad that it [kept] me from going to school. I ended up missing so much school that I couldn't catch up, and my grades started to fall. I almost didn't graduate because I had missed so much school. I just [couldn't] manage the anxiety.

She also reported struggling with social anxiety and noted that she has a “tendency to get into her own head.”

Steve and Hillary shared similar struggles with executive functioning and time management. Hillary provided some insight into her thoughts on the issues with which she struggled. She said,

I know there is a correlation between being profoundly gifted and Asperger's, or issues such as executive functioning and getting it together. I didn't have the skills I needed to get my work done. I could have done well if I had figured out how to manage my time better, but I was just so distracted and didn't really ever get anything done.

Johnny primarily wrestled with depression. The worst depressive episode lasted five or six years and had a severe effect on his mental health and school performance, resulting in low moods and motivation. He recalled, "If I had not been held back by my depression, I could have done anything, and I wouldn't have dropped out halfway through calculus. I would have written more. I just didn't want to do anything."

**Social Issues.** Interactions with others are an important aspect of adolescent development. Participants shared their thoughts on the difficulties they experienced as profoundly gifted young people trying to fit in with their peers. Reflecting on adolescent development produced robust memories from participants. The young adult participants reported forming friendships to be challenging due to the perceived "differentness" between themselves and others, which affects their ability to relate to peers.

All five participants expressed a strong desire to "fit in" with their peers. Several of the young adults described feeling significantly different from others, which led to a feeling of isolation. Steve reported the experience to be tiring because he constantly found himself adjusting his behavior to meet the expectations of whatever group he wanted to join. He identified those social experiences as "bad, because they forced me to abandon the things that mattered to me in order to fit in more." When he managed to have a "circle of friends, I never felt understood or able to express myself." Courtney



expressed similar experiences, stating, “I couldn’t make friends very easily. I was not the same as them. I was different, and they didn’t want to be friends with me.”

Sandra believes she was deprived of critical social experiences that may have shaped her into a successful person. She declared that “time with others helps shape you into an actual person.” Sandra said she will always “wonder what might have happened if I had the opportunity to go to school and socialize like other kids.” Johnny stated that his peers often made him feel like “an alien or whatever.”

**Resentment.** Several participants discussed their feelings of resentment toward being profoundly gifted. High intelligence resulted in experiences that caused many of the participants to feel lonely and disappointed with life. Although some of the young adults indicated that they would not change the fact that they are profoundly gifted individuals, they felt resentful about the loss of healthy social lives. Johnny did not think that being profoundly gifted should mean sacrificing a “normal” social life. He said, “Being smart and having a school with great academics [was great], but losing everything else, I didn’t think it was a good tradeoff.” Hillary thought that being profoundly gifted “brings more hurdles than benefits.”

Sandra expressed the most resentment about her experience as a profoundly gifted adolescent. She said the choices her parents made due to her profound giftedness caused “irreparable damage.” She related feeling resentful that she had missed the social experiences she thought others had experienced:

My entire future was destroyed; my ability to connect with other people were all destroyed for this. One of my closest friends grew up in the projects. ...He is one

of the smartest people I have ever met, absolutely smarter than me. ...[But] he has social intelligence, so he didn't get screwed over on that.

From Sandra's perspective, the exceedingly high expectations placed on profoundly gifted kids are why so many gifted kids try to commit suicide. She continued, It's absolutely absurd. It's a hope you give them to set them up for [the] future, I get it, but it's not worth it. ...Many other profoundly gifted kids I knew growing up were pushed into all sorts of things. They ended being super uptight until they hit the real world, and it [broke] them.

Johnny also felt as though his intellectual giftedness had ruined his life. He stated that he would never be able to have the life that he truly wanted because it had been destroyed by having to move for his education.

### ***Research Question 2***

What are profoundly gifted young adults' perceptions of barriers and supports during adolescence?

Each of the five participants spoke about how the high expectations imposed during adolescence were barriers to success; however, some noted that, in other ways, the high expectations provided support. Rebellious attitudes, at times, were barriers to success. Several participants engaged in nonconforming behavior with adverse effects on achievement. School was a barrier for participants when they were not in appropriate environments. Some of the young adults had attended schools for gifted students; however, although there were some positive components in those schools, issues such as social interactions, expectations, and competition tended to be barriers to success.

All participants in this study reported that their lack of motivation was a barrier to success. Mental health issues such as ADHD, ASD, anxiety, and depression were recurring problems with which each of the participants struggled to manage. Additionally, all five participants saw encouragement as a motivating act that often resulted in positive overall outcomes.

**Expectations.** The five participants referred to the perceived expectations set both by others and by themselves. The young adults discussed both general and specific external expectations. Participants also noted the times when expectations were either barriers or supports to success.

**Barriers.** Participants shared that they set high expectations for themselves, which turned into barriers when reality did not align with those expectations. Obstacles created by negative emotions toward the self were associated with disappointment and failure and often interfered with successful development.

Sandra expressed frustration as she recalled the tough experiences of not living up to her expectations. Disappointment over the failures in her life eventually became a barrier to her healthy development. When things did not go as she had expected, the trauma of the experiences negatively impacted her self-confidence. Sandra had always assumed that she would achieve and have a life in academia. She struggled for a few years before finding a path for personal satisfaction.

Hillary said she does not have the internal pressure to “get things done,” something that, at times, has been a barrier to success in school. She elaborated on the problem, stating that she “never feels pressure or stress to meet expectations.” During the

middle of eighth grade, she struggled to meet expectations after learning she would not be graduating with her class and would need to repeat a year. Hillary said,

I just didn't have the skills to meet their expectations for work completion. They would give us a 3-hour general work period, and we were expected to get our work done and submitted at the end of the week.

Steve felt frustrated with his inability to meet internal expectations. The failure to reach the academic levels of achievement he expected of himself had a significant effect on his self-esteem. He said, "School got more and more frustrating. ...I knew that I was capable, but I never seemed to be able to reach my goal." This reality became a barrier for Steve, as he was confused as to why achievement in school was so elusive.

Teachers' expectations were a common frustration shared by participants. Several individuals elaborated on those expectations. Johnny recalled the disappointment of discovering that one of his university English professors did not care about the quality of his work. He was so annoyed that he eventually decided he had had enough with college and dropped out. He shared that he felt like his peers expected him to be perfect, which was an impossible standard to meet. Johnny believed that it is unreasonable to expect perfection, yet that is what frequently happens for profoundly gifted individuals.

Hillary also discussed the expectations she faced at school. She had entered a private middle school with higher overall expectations than her public elementary school, which was more than she wanted to give. She is unsure how she had performed during those years; however, she knew she was not "pulling it off."

**Supports.** Courtney shared her thoughts on her internal expectations and how they were supports for her goal for success. She admitted knowing what she is capable of,

which has now become her standard. She felt supported by her teachers, whom she reported as always concerned about her well-being, encouraging her even when she was undergoing various struggles. She generally had strong relationships with her teachers, which she firmly believes helped support her through difficult periods. She explained, “My teachers have always sympathized and cared enough that they would help in any way they could.”

Steve shared his thoughts on the most influential professor he has had to date. He explained that, his entire life, expectations set for him were extremely low. Throughout his school years, he never felt challenged to work harder or push himself. For the first time in his life, Steve had someone hold him to high expectations and to stretch beyond his limits.

Johnny regretted that he had not lived up to the expectations of his teachers. He knew they recognized his intelligence and, therefore, had higher expectations for him. He said he had the wrong priorities in high school; however, one teacher recognized his intelligence. The recognition, Johnny said, “felt really good” and increased his motivation. Johnny recalled an experience in middle school when his teacher displayed disappointment by shaking his head as Johnny gave his presentation because he “wasn’t prepared and was making it up on the spot.” He regretted that experience and never wanted to disappoint his teacher again, instead vowing to put in more effort and do better.

**Rebellion.** Rebellious attitudes toward teachers were a serious problem for some participants. Power struggles posed issues for those whose rebellious attitudes often resulted in negative outcomes. Several of the young adults reported struggles with

autonomy. Hillary discussed conflicts with her parents over her lack of freedom. She explained,

I wouldn't do my homework and I would skip classes because I was really frustrated with my parents. In hindsight, that probably wasn't a great reason to do poorly in school, but I was just annoyed at my parents all the time.

Hillary's rebellion impacted middle school when severe underachievement left her with few options. She dropped out of eighth grade and did not return until the following year. She reported being rebellious during high school and thinking it was "cool to hate school." Her rebellion against school and parents introduced a tumultuous period that only began to settle when she went to college.

Verbal confrontations and disrespect for teachers emerged as an issue for some participants. When teachers were engaging and respectful, life seemed to be less problematic. Johnny reported multiple verbal confrontations with his teachers, one of which occurred in a high school English course. He had failed to submit an essay on time, instead deciding to turn it in late. He received a grade of 0 but fought with his teacher about the five percent to which he was entitled by submitting the assignment a day before the final date of acceptance.

**Social.** All five participants reported social experiences to be significant factors toward successful development. For some, the lack of social peers created difficulties during adolescent development. Missed opportunities for social interaction likely contributed to the problems in relating to peers in any significant way.

Multiple years of feeling out of sync with classmates led in difficulties with social relationships and negative feelings toward school. Participants felt they were missing the

necessary skills to interact with peers. Without social skills, adolescent development became a difficult period of emotional turmoil. Steve provided some insight, explaining that it was “extremely frustrating to not know how to or what to talk to people about.” Steve went on to say that his difficulties made it challenging to connect with others. School would often involve uncomfortable, unsatisfying social experiences that had significant effects on development.

Sandra does not feel she had enough positive social interaction during adolescence. She looked forward to math competitions, not because of the competition, but for the “rare social outlet of getting to practice with other people on a team.” When Sandra received acceptance to the university, she revealed,

I didn't think it was going to be a problem that I was poorly socialized. I figured that I was going into academia, so if I was smart enough, that would be okay. Typically, professors are supposed to be eccentric, so it shouldn't be a problem. ...I ended up flaming out, which made it clear that no matter how smart you are, if you don't know how to be a person, you're just not going to succeed at school.

Although Sandra believes school is important, she felt that it mostly because it is a place to socialize. School is where young people learn valuable skills for living and interacting with others.

**Motivation.** Each participant reported that motivation was a barrier to success in school. Johnny noted the effects of having a lack of motivation, stating,

When I am motivated, I can do a lot, but that just hasn't been happening. There has probably been a year and a half of downtime, [of] me just straight up not

putting in any effort. There are long periods [when] I am sitting around doing nothing because I don't have any motivation.

Johnny indicated that he has always struggled with motivation, explaining, "I've been dealing with this my whole life, where I am really into something, and then, for whatever reason, I become unmotivated. ...It was that way with school, too."

Steve also reported difficulties in maintaining his motivation. He identified underachievement as having always been an "easy pattern that I fall into." He explained that he has always had times when he feels "productive and motivated to achieve," and then, for whatever reason, something changes, and he becomes less motivated. Steve relayed, "It can be very frustrating because I start out motivated, but then, over time, I forget what I am even striving for."

Hillary identified motivation as an issue, saying, "I think it is my biggest problem because as I feel a deadline approaching, there is absolutely no motivation or pressure to get it done, so I have to convince myself logically that this is important to do." Hillary had failed one of her classes during her first term in college. She said,

I just wasn't at all interested in what we were reading for class. The class discussions were interesting, but unfortunately, the assigned reading was boring. ...I can spend hours doing research about stuff that I am interested in, but I just can't bring myself to read or do anything if I don't care [about it].

Steve discussed his lack of motivation in a program designed for highly motivated, high-achieving students. His lack of motivation, according to his mother,



Sophie, was exacerbated by his associations with other unmotivated students. Steve recalled,

I was in a program with very high expectations in terms of course load and the amount of homework. ...The kids around me were highly motivated, hard-working, and high achieving, and I didn't care about any of it. ...I didn't really fit in there because I was not highly motivated, hard-working, or high-achieving.

Steve shared that he would rather give up earning an A in a class to have extra time to spend on other pursuits, such as making new friends, traveling, or hobbies.

**Mental Health.** Participants opened up and shared their struggles with mental health. These five young adults had various diagnoses of ADHD, ASD, anxiety, and depression. The participants reported that their mental health issues caused serious problems throughout adolescence.

Several participants discussed their experiences with anxiety. Sandra suffered extreme anxiety during college, which had an impact on her ability to succeed. During her first year of college, Sandra recalled turning to alcohol to relieve her anxiety while in school. She felt unprepared for life on her own, which resulted in severe episodes of anxiety and depression. Sandra's traumatic experiences with anxiety and depression led to the loss of self-confidence and dropping out of school. After a year off of school, she returned to the university, only to have another unsuccessful experience. Sandra felt she had devoted her life to the pursuit of attending an elite university and a career in academia. For the longest time, she had been on a clear path with a clear goal without ever questioning why. Sandra had been preparing for something her entire life that she

had never decided to do. Failure to accomplish this goal was not only disappointing, but shattered her self-identity and made her question everything she had worked toward, including why she had even wanted it to begin with. She had prioritized the expectations of achievement above any sort of personal fulfillment.

Courtney's prolonged bouts with anxiety led into severe underachievement during the later years of high school. Her inability to manage the anxiety resulted in poor grades, removal from the dual-enrollment program, and failure to graduate from high school a year early. She reported feeling physically ill from anxiety, which caused excessive absences.

Steve and Hillary both struggled to manage deficits in executive functioning and time management. Hillary was aware of the correlation between being profoundly gifted and having Asperger's or issues with executive functioning; however, she "lacked the skills I needed to get the work done on time."

Steve was in his final year of high school before receiving a diagnosis of and treatment for ADHD, which had a tremendous impact on his life. Steve was amazed at the difference in his ability to maintain focus and retain all of the information provided in class. Steve believed his problems in school occurred due to a combination of unchallenging schoolwork, poor social skills, and low moods.

Johnny primarily struggled with depression. He battled a severe depressive episode after his family moved when he was in middle school. The episode lasted years and resulted in poor motivation.

**Encouragement.** All five of the participants viewed encouragement as a support during adolescence. The encouragement from parents and teachers provided many of the

participants with much-needed hope and recognition. Teachers were instrumental in aiding these young individuals through the difficulties associated with adolescence.

Johnny shared an experience with a caring teacher in high school who encouraged him to challenge himself. His teacher recognized that Johnny was underchallenged in his secondary writing course and introduced the possibility of enrolling him in a more appropriate university course the following semester.

Steve also discussed an influential teacher he encountered during his high school dual-enrollment period. The professor recognized that Steve had extraordinary writing potential and challenged him to stretch himself. The professor explained to Steve that he wrote good essays, but he knew that Steve could do much better. The challenge to work harder motivated Steve, and he improved his writing skills. Steve's professor quickly became his mentor.

Other participants spoke about the positive impact of parental encouragement during the difficult years of adolescence. Hillary shared that, although she wanted autonomy, she recognized her parents had always encouraged and supported her. According to Courtney, her mother had reasonable expectations, which Courtney thought helpful for staying somewhat balanced. Courtney's mother, Allison, said she would support her daughter in whatever she wanted to do as long as she was happy. Sandra also acknowledged that her parents were incredibly supportive during adolescence and were there for her throughout the various struggles she experienced.

### ***Research Question 3***

What are parents' perceptions of their profoundly gifted children's development through adolescence?

Four parents of young adults reflected and provided their perspectives on their children's development throughout adolescence. A review of parent interviews showed several common themes. As with the young adults, parent participants had strong views regarding external expectations and how their children had internalized them. Several parents mentioned that school, in some way, had impacted their child's development. Social issues, self-confidence, and asynchrony emerged as topics discussed by participants. Mental health struggles had a severe impact on their children's development during adolescence.

**Expectations.** Several parents addressed the pressures of expectations and how they impacted their children. Sophie shared that her son, Steve, holds very high expectations for himself. She explained,

He is often disappointed with himself due to a missed deadline or opportunity and will then beat himself up mentally because of it. He spends so much time keeping up with classwork that he doesn't have time for other things, like securing a campus job or internship. I know he feels those are huge failures in his mind.

Allison also mentioned that her daughter, Courtney, held high standards for herself; as such, "There was never a need to tell her that she had to do well; she just always did until she didn't."

Janet discussed the intense pressure from external sources that she believes her daughter, Sandra, experienced and internalized. Janet strongly believes that pressure from adults can be overwhelming and difficult for an adolescent to understand. Janet shared her perspective of when Sandra was enrolled in a school for profoundly gifted students

during early adolescence. Janet found the expectations conveyed by school leaders to be both shocking and worrisome, as she explained,

They had set the bar very high. Essentially, if you didn't cure cancer, discover a math theorem, or move the world along in some way, you have underachieved.

The normal careers, such as doctor or lawyer—that would be considered underachievement. Anything short of where they set the bar was a failure. At that time, I thought it's almost like these kids were set up to fail because no matter what they did, unless they did what nobody has done before, they've underachieved.

Janet also shared that Sandra held unreasonable expectations for herself. Despite being enrolled in advanced university courses with classmates who were at least 8 years older, Sandra questioned her giftedness because she now had to put in effort to achieve. Because the subject was no longer intuitive, Sandra now doubted her abilities.

**Schooling.** All participants shared their perceptions regarding how school impacted their children during adolescence. Each young person had required adjustments to their education. All but one parent participant mentioned having found it necessary to relocate the family to access more appropriate educational resources for their profoundly gifted children. Allison, the only participant whose family did not move, felt her child might have had a more positive experience had she been in an environment that provided more options. Allison questioned the family's decision to remain in the rural environment where they lived with its limited options.

**Asynchrony and social issues.** Several participants identified their child as having exhibited significant asynchronous behavior during adolescence. The asynchrony occasionally impacted social interactions, leading the youth to feel as if they were “out of sync” with their peers and often resulting in loneliness.

Participants explained that social interactions were difficult for their children to navigate, particularly during adolescence. Multiple participants said their child felt different as a result of being highly intelligent, which created hardships for each of the young adults. Janet explained that forming friendships was always a struggle for Sandra; however, this area is where she has seen the most growth in her daughter as a young adult. Janet said, “I am really proud of her that she can now live in a world alongside people who are not profoundly gifted.” Janet reported that Sandra just wanted to be accepted by her peers and not be seen as different.

Sophie shared that her son, Steve, was not very independent and ended up with an unmotivated, underachieving group in school because he wanted to have a circle of friends. Sophie said that Steve struggled to make and retain friends during adolescence, adding, “You end up feeling like a Martian because nobody from your tribe is around you.” Barbara identified that her daughter, Hillary, as more successful in forming friendships; however, that became an issue during middle school when “she did nothing but socialize.”

Allison recalled that Courtney never had many friends, and in high school, she had none. Accordingly, she believes Courtney has missed important social experiences typical of the adolescent years. Allison noted, “She is too responsible because she doesn’t have any friends to be irresponsible with.” Allison remembers Courtney having stronger

relationships with her teachers than with her classmates. She is not sure if Courtney's social struggles are related to her giftedness, but they have affected her daughter significantly.

**Imposter syndrome and self-confidence.** Two participants mentioned the concept of imposter syndrome as an issue for their child. Being gifted yet unable to meet expectations is an extremely confusing state during adolescence. Sophie described her child's struggle with comparing himself to his profoundly gifted peers. In a school full of highly motivated, highly successful students, Steve often wondered, "Why not me?" Janet explained that her daughter would question her abilities because she would unreasonably compare herself to other students who were much older. She relayed that when Sandra was unable to achieve at the level she had expected, her self-confidence dropped, causing Sandra to feel like an "imposter." Janet shared, "[Sandra's] desire to excel never changed. I think what changed was the concept of if she could achieve."

**Mental Health.** All participants revealed that their children struggle with issues related to mental health. Anxiety, ADHD, ASD/Asperger's, and depression were some of the problems reported by the parents. Participants shared difficult experiences during their child's adolescent years that resulted in underachievement.

Barbara discussed her daughter, Hillary, as an adolescent. After seriously underachieving during middle school, Hillary rebelled and dropped out of her middle school program. This serious episode of rebellion and underachievement led to research into a possible high-functioning autism/Asperger's diagnosis. After consulting with several professionals and receiving a diagnosis, Hillary was able to get an individualized education plan in high school.

Allison relayed Courtney's battle with anxiety and depression, noting that debilitating anxiety and panic resulted in serious underachievement during high school. Courtney's extreme anxiety and ensuing depression often made it extremely difficult for her to attend school. Excessive absences during her final year of high school threatened her ability to graduate. Sophie explained that anxiety and depression were also difficulties her son, Steve, faced during adolescence. Severe anxiety and depression frequently interfered with Steve's ability to attend classes, having a profound effect on his grades. According to Sophie, high school was extremely difficult because Steve was receiving a lot of misdiagnoses and multiple adjustments to his medication. Sophie recalls those years being very difficult.

Janet shared that, from her perspective, Sandra was dealing with a great deal of emotional pressure during adolescence. Janet said, "Those emotional pressures can be a bit overwhelming for someone who doesn't have the tools to be able to deal with those issues."

#### ***Research Question 4***

What are barriers and supports for profoundly gifted adolescents as they move into adulthood?

From the five young adults' discussions about moving into adulthood, it was evident that they are still attempting to figure out how to manage the transition. Many of the same struggles remain as they move into the next phase of their lives. Expectations continue to impact their lives as they sort out societal expectations that are often internalized. Some participants reported ongoing difficulties with motivation and effort, which have the potential to create barriers to achievement. Mental health issues were also



common; however, most of the participants appeared to understand they will need to seek support to resolve these concerns.

**Expectations.** Expectations from “everywhere” continue to influence the lives of many participants. Sandra said she still feels expectations from society to achieve more; however, in her opinion, she has “achieved beyond my wildest dreams.” Although she might not be living up to society’s expectations for a profoundly gifted young adult, Sandra has been consistently meeting her internal expectations. She discussed achieving several milestones as an adult. She now feels the freedom to shape her life the way she wants it to be and is proud of finally being able to manage simple tasks she would not have been able to do a few years ago. Sandra discussed having recently gone on a West Coast trip with friends, a significant experience she “never thought would be possible for someone like me.”

Johnny expressed frustration regarding adult expectations of attending college. He does not feel the need to go to college, as he is already working in his chosen career. He reports repeated lectures by adults about the importance of going to college. He also feels judged for still living at home and not attending an elite university. Steve shared that expectations are “way too low.” College was not what he had expected, leading him to realize it was not that important. He sees it as “another educational milestone” rather than a place where he has learned very much.

All participants shared the importance of living up to their expectations for themselves. They all questioned adult expectations and, in some cases, did not feel prepared to do anything on their own. They are all still trying to determine how many of

society's expectations they are willing to fulfill while remaining authentic and true to themselves.

**Mental Health.** Mental health struggles continue to impact the five participants. The individuals navigate their unique personal battles, which is not likely to change any time soon. All five young adults admit to having issues they will need to address if they are to achieve greater success.

Sandra identified one of her adult milestones as finally booking an appointment with a therapist to “unpack some of this stuff.” She still experiences “so much anxiety around the smallest things.” Johnny has not visited a therapist for a while, as he has been depression-free for some time; rather, he visits only “when there is a need to.” He believes having that support available when he is struggling is essential.

**Motivation and Encouragement.** Motivation continues to be a challenge, as the participants are still in the process of maturing and determining how to conduct themselves as adults. A lack of motivation threatens participants' ability to complete projects for work and school successfully. Johnny is grateful that he can work for himself, which allows him “freedom to do things my way”; also, he stated that he would “not want to be stuck at a desk job.” Hillary still struggles with motivation in college, making it difficult to complete the assignments that she does not find interesting.

Encouragement plays a critical role in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Several participants noted that encouragement from parents provides much-needed support as they learn how to manage life independently. Hillary stated that her parents were always encouraging and supportive, even when she did not want to accept their assistance.

## **Themes**

### *Development of Themes*

Theme development began during audio-recording review and the process of transcription. During that time, the researcher made notes and recorded recurring themes in a data analysis chart. Transcripts underwent multiple reviews to confirm the compiled themes. After generating several memos, the researcher created a table to organize themes, recording them as they began to emerge. After reviewing transcripts several times, the researcher uploaded and coded them using the qualitative software program NVivo, next reviewing statements and further organizing them into themes. Five major themes emerged: expectations, rebellion, mental health, motivation, and social issues. Minor themes also appeared, including resentment, imposter syndrome, encouragement, self-confidence, and asynchrony. A report of each of the five major themes follows with a summary of data collected from participants. Tables 4.2 and 4.3 show the five major themes in the context of participant reports.

Table 4.2: Data Analysis – Young Adult

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sandra</b>	<b>Johnny</b>	<b>Steve</b>	<b>Courtney</b>	<b>Hillary</b>
Expectations	x	x	x	x	x
Rebellion (against the norm/ society/authority)	x	x	x	x	x
Resentment	x	x	x		
Disappointment (life-others)	x	x	x		
Encouragement	x	x	x	x	x
School system	x	x	x	x	x
Mental health (anxiety/ADHD/ ASD/depression)	x	x	x	x	x
Motivation	x	x	x	x	x
Social issues (lonely/isolated)	x	x	x	x	

Table 4.3: Data Analysis – Parents

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Janet</b>	<b>Sophie</b>	<b>Allison</b>	<b>Barbara</b>
Expectations	x	x	x	
Social, lonely, isolated	x	x	x	
Imposter syndrome	x	x		
Self-confidence	x	x	x	
Asynchrony	x			x
School	x	x	x	x
Mental health (anxiety/ADHD/ ASD/depression)	x	x	x	x

### ***Theme 1: Expectations***

*“I felt massive amounts of pressure [in] everything that I showed interest in that [might] have showed any potential for a career, anything that would make money...like being good at playing piano, it would be suggested that I play Carnegie Hall some-day.” —*

*Sandra*

Each of the participants interviewed for this study addressed the impact of both external and internal expectations. All of the participants shared thoughts on the internal expectations that they set for themselves and the external expectations that came from their environments. Some participants reported setting high expectations, and others did not. Although the participants understood they were highly intelligent and capable of achieving, falling short of their internal expectations caused them problems.

Each of the five participants spoke extensively about the perceived expectations, both general and specific, that they felt from themselves and others. In addition to speaking to expectations in general terms, the participants also noted areas where their expectations were both barriers and supports to achievement.

**Internal Expectations.** The participants indicated a desire to meet their basic internal standards. Johnny relayed his thoughts on the minimum expectations he set for himself. He explained that he does not need to be “super successful,” but he needs to feel respect for his chosen career. He went on to state that he does not want to be “unemployed or uneducated.” For now, Johnny feels content telling others that he has a job teaching. He finds teaching enjoyable and worthwhile, something that he can respect himself for doing.

Sandra expressed her frustration when she recalled the tough experiences of not living up to expectations, which adversely affected her for years. Sandra had assumed that she would achieve certain expectations; when she fell short, she felt that she could not control her life and struggled to manage. In comparison, Hillary did not have the internal pressure to “get things done.” She will, however, achieving goals she deems important. She knows the lack of personal pressure is a problem, yet she has to logically convince herself of the importance of a particular task because she never feels pressure or stress to meet expectations.

Steve expressed irritation with his inability to meet his internal expectations. He said,

Over time, I was frustrated because I felt that I was capable of more, but I was never able to reach my goal. As school got harder, I became more aware of the fact that I was supposed to be able to achieve, and that was not the reality I was experiencing at all. If I am so smart, then why is this so impossible for me?

Steve’s parent, Sophie, also discussed those experiences:

He has super high expectations for himself and feels terrible when he doesn’t meet them. He beats himself up mentally because he just really never works to the level that he wants to work. I think it’s really hard for him to look at other profoundly gifted kids who are doing exceedingly well, and [he] wonders, “Why not me?”

Courtney shared her thoughts on her internal expectations. She stated that she knows what she is capable of, which became her expected standard. She explained,

I always knew that school was important without anyone having to tell me. I always wanted to do well, [and] my parents didn't have to tell me to get good grades. It was just something that I knew I could do, and so that is what I would strive for. When my grades started to slip, I tried to convince myself that bad grades were okay because I couldn't accept that my grades were so terrible.

Courtney went on to say that if she does not meet her own expectations, she is not doing her best. Courtney does not expect straight A's; she just wants to know she is achieving her potential and putting in the effort.

*External Expectations.* Each of the participants discussed external expectations at length. Depending on individuals' experiences, the participants identified expectations as either a barrier or support to achievement. Sandra believed the external expectations impeded her success. She said,

I felt massive amounts of pressure [in] everything that I showed interest in that [might] have showed any potential for a career, anything that would make money...like being good at playing piano, it would be suggested that I play Carnegie Hall someday.

Courtney expressed a similar sentiment. When she declared she would like to be a professional piercer, her father immediately said that "I was too smart for that." She felt upset by that statement because she believed that she had no obligation to have a "smart job" just because she is a "smart person." She deemed the expectation that smart people have to do something extra special to be a "detriment to society." On the other hand, her mother never put her under any pressure, always saying "she didn't care what I did for a

job as long as I was happy.” Courtney liked to remember her mother’s support during difficult situations.

Johnny spoke about the expectations he experienced at school, both negative and positive. He remembered the when his peers had unreasonable expectations about him because he was the “smart guy.” He felt as though he was “never allowed to make a mistake.” Johnny said that it is unreasonable to expect perfection from anyone, yet that is what frequently happens with the profoundly gifted. He also felt expectations and the pressure to attend college, which he strongly felt were unnecessary. He often encountered worried adults who lectured him about how he needs to go to college. He gets frustrated when people ask things like, “Since you are profoundly gifted, why do you live at home and not attend Harvard or Stanford?” One of Johnny’s middle school history teachers recognized his potential and set high expectations for his bright student. Johnny, however, did not care to live up to those expectations and grossly underachieved in his class. During a class presentation, Johnny remembered his teacher “shaking his head as I gave my presentation because I was making it up on the spot.”

Hillary also discussed the expectations she experienced at school. She had entered a private middle school that had higher overall expectations than her public elementary school. She believed that she could have attained more success had she started at the school much earlier. The expectations required more than Hillary wanted to give. Midway through eighth grade, she had struggled to meet the minimum expectations and had not completed enough schoolwork to graduate with her class. Hillary stated, “I just didn’t have the skills to meet their expectations for work completion. They would give us a 3-hour general work period, and we were expected to get our work done and submitted



at the end of the week.” She said she was not sure how she had performed during those years but thought that she was not “pulling it off.” Although her parents also have high expectations, Hillary is content to figure things out by herself and does not care about meeting her parents’ expectations.

The participants reported feeling frustrated by their teachers’ expectations. Several of the young adults shared stories of their experiences with having teachers with either high expectations or no expectations at all. Johnny related having a college professor who he determined had no expectations for class essays. To confirm this theory, Johnny started submitting “ridiculous” essays to see what kind of grade he would receive, and sure enough, he still received A’s. He felt disappointed when he realized the professor did not care about students’ work. He said, “Maybe if I were at a more advanced school where they expected more, things would have been different. It was just disappointing to figure out that this is all we were supposed to be doing.”

Although educators could sometimes pose barriers to achievement, supportive teachers often inspired in greater achievement. Steve spoke about a professor who later became his mentor and friend. The professor raised expectations for Steve, something he said that “I had never experienced before and have not experienced since.” Steve was motivated to perform better by the encouragement and higher expectations set by his professor, saying,

The experience changed the way I looked at things and the effort that I would put in. Although my papers were fine, he knew that I could write stronger papers and challenged me to do so. I worked really hard on those papers, and my writing really improved.

Janet shared her thoughts on expectations for profoundly gifted individuals. She believed that unrealistic expectations of profoundly gifted young people were “unjust burden[s]” that caused problems, especially at the school for profoundly gifted students her daughter attended. Janet felt the educators at that school “set the bar way too high” for students, causing many students to feel like failures when they did not meet expectations. Janet said,

It’s almost like these kids were set up to fail because no matter what they did, unless they did what nobody has done before, they [had] underachieved. They were expected to do something exceptional like cure cancer, discover a new math theorem, or something that moves society along. The expectation to reach such high level needs to be reexamined because it puts a lot of pressure on the kids. Adults are the ones [who] need to temper that pressure [because] they already tend to put a lot of pressure on themselves.

### ***Theme 2: Rebellion***

*“I felt like I couldn’t do well in school until I had gotten more freedom from [my parents] as a person.” —Hillary*

All five young adults recalled feeling rebellious toward societal expectations and authority. The participants directed their rebellion toward either authority or society, or in some cases, both. The participants reported that these rebellious attitudes posed difficulties for them throughout school, sometimes resulting in underachievement.

Rebellious attitudes toward teachers tended to be a problem for each of these participants. Johnny discussed an encounter during middle school when he engaged in a

verbal confrontation with one of his teachers. For the first time, his school had provided an accelerated science class; unfortunately, Johnny thought his teacher did not like him and was unkind. He said,

We were doing rockets at the end of the year, and while I was talking to my friend, the teacher skipped over my name. She was going in alphabetical order, and she just skipped my name. At the end of the list, I got up and told my friend she skipped my name so I'm going to get my rocket. She said, "No, I didn't forget it; I skipped it because you weren't paying attention, and you didn't notice." I said, "If I didn't notice, then how come I noticed when the names were stated alphabetically? So I guess I was paying attention, huh?"

Power struggles were a common issue reported by all of the participants. The rebellious attitudes could sometimes present obstacles to students' overall achievement. During his second year at the university, Johnny recalled being so angry when told he could not switch classes that he dropped out of school for a semester. Johnny said,

I was pretty sure that I could [switch classes], so I called my mom and said that I didn't want to take the class. I was able to change my class and get the one that I wanted; however, that just made me angrier, because that guy was wrong, and I was not. I said, "Well, now I'm not going. Never mind, cancel it all; I'm not going."

Courtney shared her thoughts on societal expectations of achievement. She noted that she had ideas about what she wanted to do, but none of them entailed trying to be better than other people. She said,

Some people think you have to have a fancy job or do fancy things because they want to impress [others], but that's not at all what I am interested in. There was a point in time [when] I seriously thought about being a professional piercer, but my dad said that I was too smart for that. I was just born smart, but that doesn't mean I have to do anything in particular. I think that is one thing that society thinks. [They think], "Oh, you were born smart, so you have to [have] a smart job," which can be a real detriment sometimes.

The overall consensus among participants was that they did not appreciate being expected to achieve at a higher standard because of their intelligence.

The participants also reported struggling with authority, which often led to rebellion. Hillary reported that she had serious issues with her parents over her lack of freedom. She said,

I could never really do any homework, or I would skip classes because I was really frustrated with my parents. In hindsight, that probably wasn't a great reason to do poorly in school, but I was just annoyed at my parents all [of] the time. I felt like I couldn't do well in school until I had gotten more freedom from them as a person. ...That's just how I felt. I never really got that freedom until college, and I think it does help.

Sandra's rebellion against societal expectations provided her the opportunity to attain peace with her current situation. She stated,

Honestly, it's been the most liberating thing of my life. I still don't have a degree from anywhere, and I'm sure my life is going to go to shit because it usually does,

but for now, I have a job that I am fortunate to have, even though I think it sucks a lot. I hate the tech industry and everything about it, but you know, [a] well-paid programmer is still supposed to be one of those high-status STEM lord jobs. So it turns out I was able to do it after all.

### ***Theme 3: Social***

All of the participants discussed social issues and described struggling to belong. Social dilemmas caused feelings of isolation, loneliness, and frustration. The young adults shared experiences during adolescence to illustrate the difficulties that they had endured. All spoke about their strong desires for acceptance and to fit in with their peers. The experiences shared in the interviews showed the feelings associated with the social experiences of each of these young adults.

Several participants felt resentful about their lack of social activity. Sandra shared her thoughts about her lack of social experiences during her adolescent years. She said,

I didn't have any social experiences to speak of, because apparently, it was more important to shut me up and teach me calculus than it was to have me interact with people. I used to participate in math competitions, which I liked, but I think I just liked that it was one of the rare social outlets of getting to practice with other people on the team more than anything else.

Sandra shared that she believes that school is important, but mostly because it is a place to socialize. She explained that one of the most valuable things she has taken away from any of her years attending school is that "time spent with others helped shape me into an actual person."

Several participants reported not fitting in and feeling “different” from their peers. Johnny said he felt like an “alien” at times; although his peers liked him, they viewed him as different. Similarly, Courtney said, “I couldn’t make friends very easily [because] I was not the same as them. I was different, and they didn’t want to be friends with me.”

Steve identified the social aspects of being profoundly gifted as tremendously negative during adolescence. He shared his frustration about “not knowing what other people would want to talk about,” which made trying to connect with others a struggle. He identified those experiences as having adverse effects on his self-esteem. He said,

It was definitely tiring just because I had to try hard to fit in and be different than I would normally be. It was also bad for my sense of self in a way because it forced me to abandon the things that really interested me and mattered [to me] in order to do the things [that] I needed to do to fit in more.

Several participants addressed the loneliness associated with being profoundly gifted. Feeling out of sync and misunderstood by peers resulted in painful experiences for some participants. Steve shared that he “often felt lonely but just didn’t think about it a lot.” Although school was a difficult experience for the participants, they all expressed the desire to “go to school and have a social environment where they could meet people.”

Two participants, Johnny and Hillary, shared experiences that indicated some success with developing social relationships. Although Johnny reported always feeling a little socially awkward, he believed he was lucky because he knew could have had social issues during middle school; however, he managed to stay relatively popular. Hillary shared that, during middle school, she struggled to fit in with the mainstream group but

“managed to be friends with anyone who was goofy.” She identified some benefits of going to a school for gifted students in that it was “cool to like school” and the “better you were [at school], the more popular you were.” This environment allowed Courtney to be herself intellectually.

Making friends was an extreme challenge for several participants. Steve spoke extensively about his difficulties in this regard, saying,

I would say [that] it was really hard to make friends and have social connections without learning how to do that first. Making friends, having connections, and that kind of thing was not a natural thing and was something that I had to learn. I had to learn how to change myself and behave in order to have those kinds of friendships or relationships. It was hard to grow friendships naturally, and it was definitely isolating and lonely at times.

Several participants shared that they avoided being themselves with groups of people and changed their behaviors so they could “fit in.” When asked about the effect of modifying their behavior to create social experiences on their emotions, the overwhelming sentiment was that the participants felt that it was an “isolating” experience. Steve shared, “Even when I felt like I had friends or a circle of friends, I didn’t feel understood or able to express myself much.”

Sandra explained that, because others expected her to go to an elite academic institution, she did not worry about having social skills. She said,

I didn’t think it was going to matter if I was poorly socialized. To go into academia, if I was smart enough, that would be okay, right? Yeah, professors are

supposed to be eccentric, so it was all going to be okay. But it wasn't, and I just ended up flaming out, which made [it] clear that no matter how smart you are, if you don't know how to be a person, you're just not going to succeed at school.

#### ***Theme 4: Mental Health***

*“I could have done well if I had figured out how to manage my time better, but I was just so distracted and didn't really ever get anything done.” —Hillary*

Participant courageously shared their struggles with mental health issues. These five young adults had variously received diagnoses of ADHD, anxiety, and depression. Although the participants had unique struggles, they identified mental health issues as barriers to their achievement. Their recurring periods of underperformance provided evidence of the difficulties they endured.

Several participants described their experiences with anxiety. Sandra suffered extreme anxiety during college, which hurt her ability to succeed. Her heightened state of anxiety let her to engage in harmful behaviors to quiet her sense of overwhelming fear. She said,

I started drinking just to deal with the anxiety and depression. I was so anxious [that] I couldn't do anything. Sometimes, I would pace back and forth in my room for an hour, working up the courage to go hang out with my friends in the lounge, people that I was actually reasonably sure liked me. I drank to go to places like the bank and the grocery store because I was terrified. ...I just thought something bad would happen and everybody would know that I didn't know the right things to do.



As a result of her anxiety and depression, Sandra struggled to pass her classes and barely passed the first semester. The experience had a significant impact on her self-esteem. She returned to school after a self-imposed break, only to have another unsuccessful experience. Sandra reflected on having devoted her life to the pursuit of attending an elite university and a career in academia. She said,

My whole life was pointing toward this light. My whole future had been destroyed for it, [and] my ability to connect with people was destroyed for this [career]. So, if I couldn't do this, then what am I supposed to do? When I failed at being successful in school the second time, it completely destroyed my sense of self. I figured [that] I had to kill myself because there was nothing else I [had] to live for if I [could not] be a mathematician.

After spending several years recovering from that dark period, Sandra has since been working to create a satisfying and financially stable life.

Courtney also reported struggling with mental health. She endured periods of extreme anxiety during adolescence, which resulted in severe underachievement during her junior and senior years of high school. Once a straight-A student on track for valedictorian, Sandra found the anxiety she felt during her junior year began to have an impact on her ability to complete her dual-enrollment coursework successfully. Her inability to manage the anxiety resulted in her removal from the program, and she was not able to graduate from high school early, as intended. She described the end of her senior year:

My anxiety got really bad. I would have panic attacks that would keep me from going to school. The anxiety would start the night before, and just build [up] until the morning. I ended up missing so much school that I couldn't catch up with the makeup work, and my grades started to fall. I almost didn't graduate because I had missed so much school.

Courtney also described having physical reactions from anxiety that presented as illness. At times, she would feel so sick that she could not go to school. If she managed to make it to school, she would end up in the nurse's office, waiting for her mother to pick her up. "I just [couldn't] manage the anxiety," she admitted. Courtney also reported struggling with social anxiety and noted that she tends to "get into my head."

Allison, Courtney's parent, also discussed Courtney's periods of extreme anxiety during high school. She said, "It was literally the building—she would see it and lose it. There wasn't a single class that she wanted to go to, which [was] so unlike her."

Steve and Hillary both struggled with executive functioning and time management. Hillary shared her views on profoundly gifted individuals and the issue of executive functioning, saying,

I know there is a correlation between being profoundly gifted and Asperger's, or issues such as executive functioning and getting it together. I didn't have the skills I needed to get my work done. I could have done well if I had figured out how to manage my time better, but I was just so distracted and didn't really ever get anything done.

Barbara, Hillary's parent, confirmed that Hillary's ASD and executive functioning challenges caused issues during K-12. She felt that her daughter could have "flown much higher" with better supports in school.

It wasn't until Steve's senior year that he received a diagnosis of ADHD. Steve recalled that everything was different after the diagnosis. As soon as he started receiving treatment, he experienced school differently. Steve admitted, "I had never been able to sit through a class and follow what was going on and retain [the information] until I was treated for ADHD." Steve's problems in school were the result of a combination of unchallenging schoolwork, poor social skills, and low moods, factors that distracted him from success. He recalled, "The other kids around me in high school were highly motivated, hard-working, and high achieving. I was depressed and didn't care about anything. I was really unhappy and struggling with untreated ADHD." Although he received the diagnosis during his later secondary years, he was grateful to have answers for why he struggled during his early years. Steve felt he could understand himself better and seek the support he needed after his diagnosis.

Steve's parent, Sophie, added that her son had "definitely struggled with deadlines and planning." According to Sophie,

He would love to be a straight-A student like he was in elementary school, but there are so many components to be met, and his grades never reflect the amount of work he does, the amount of information that he retains, or anything else. His ADHD exacerbates [his] periods of anxiety and depression.

Johnny primarily wrestled with depression, battling a severe episode after his family moved during his middle school years. The depressive episode lasted five or six years and had a negative effect on his mental health and high school performance, which resulted in low moods and motivation. Johnny admitted,

I was held back by my depression. If I had not been held back by that, then I could have done anything, and I wouldn't have dropped out halfway through calculus, and I would have written more. I just didn't want to do anything.

***Theme 5: Motivation***

*“If I [was] motivated, I imagine that I could do anything that I [want] to. The problem is that I was never really motivated to do anything.” —Johnny*

Each participant reported having struggled to stay motivated in school, which had a significant impact on academic achievement. The young adults shared thoughts about how the lack of motivation resulted in underachievement at some point during their adolescence. Johnny noted a recent example of the impact of his lack of motivation on his daily life:

When I am motivated, I can do a lot, but that just hasn't been happening. There has probably been a year and a half of downtime, [of] me just straight up not putting in any effort. There are long periods [when] I am sitting around doing nothing because I don't have any motivation.

Johnny indicated having long struggled to stay motivated. He said,

I've been dealing with this my whole life, where I am really into something, and then, for whatever reason, I become unmotivated. For a while, I will be cranking

out models, and then I just totally slow down. It was that way with school, too. I mean, what's the worst they were going to do? Make my grades go down? I didn't care about it, and there weren't really any consequences.

Steve also reported struggling to stay motivated and easily falling into the pattern of underachievement. He recalled times when he feels productive and motivated to achieve and then, for some reason, something changes and he becomes less motivated. Steve expressed frustration with situations when he starts motivated but, over time, forgets what he was striving for.

Courtney, Hillary, and Sandra all discussed their struggles with motivation. Courtney indicated that she continues to struggle with maintaining motivation. She remembers instances in high school when she "just stopped doing the work and avoided it." She stated that she tends to repeat that behavior and realizes that it is a problem because she ends up not wanting to do anything.

Hillary said she never felt pressured or stressed about anything. She realized that it is an issue and said, "I think it is my biggest problem because as I feel a deadline approaching, there is absolutely no motivation or pressure to get it done. And so, I have to convince myself logically that this is important to do." Hillary = failed one of her classes during her first semester in college. She said,

I just wasn't at all interested in what we were reading for class. The class discussions were interesting, but unfortunately, the assigned reading was boring. ...I can spend hours research[ing] stuff that I am interested in, but I just can't bring myself to read or do anything if I don't care.

Sandra recounted that in her second attempt at university, she “technically managed to pass all of my classes, but barely. ...I don’t know; I just didn’t have the passion or motivation for it.” Sandra identified her lack of passion and motivation as the reason she could not complete her university coursework.

Steve discussed his lack of incentive in a program designed for highly motivated, high-achieving students. Steve, who already lacked motivation, became even more unmotivated, perhaps, according to his mother Sophie, because he associated with other unmotivated students. Steve recalled,

I was in a program [that had] very high expectations in terms of course load and the amount of homework. ...The kids around me were highly motivated, hard-working, and high-achieving, and I didn’t care about any of it. ...I didn’t really fit in there because I was not highly motivated, hard-working, or high-achieving.

Steve thought there was only a small, but long-term difference between earning a B instead of an A, so he felt that he could spend that time on other pursuits. He used the extra time and energy for making new friends, traveling, or working on hobbies rather than studying for what he deemed to be no compelling reason.

Johnny shared his views on how motivation has impacted his life. He said,

If I [was] motivated, I imagine that I could do anything that I want. The problem is that I really never want to do anything. My whole life, [I have] been underachieving. I’d say I am underachieving now; I could be working three times as many hours, and I don’t because I don’t have to. The lack of motivation—I don’t know why I’m doing anything.

## **Summary**

Chapter four presented the qualitative data collected from nine participant interviews. After a restatement of the purpose of this study and research questions, summaries followed for each of the interviews conducted with young adults and parents. Individual reports of young adult and parent interviews allowed participants the opportunity to share their unique experiences. After reporting interview data, the researcher addressed each of the four research questions in terms of themes. Answering the research questions preceded a discussion of the process used to develop the five themes—expectations, social issues, mental health issues, rebellion, and motivation—followed by further discussion.

Chapter 5 will present the interpretation of findings generated from this research study. After an introduction and restatement of the problem, a discussion of the findings will follow, along with connections to the literature. Each of the conceptual frameworks introduced in Chapter 2 are revisited, with an analysis of how they connect to this research. Implications and limitations appear, followed by recommendations for future research and closing comments.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

Grouping gifted individuals is often by using a one-size-fits-all mentality, which typically leaves profoundly gifted students misrepresented and misunderstood (Sallan, n.d.). This study was an exploration of the personal experiences of five underachieving, profoundly gifted adolescents. Chapter four presented the data collected from one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with five young adults and four parents. Data analysis indicated five major themes: expectations, mental health issues, social issues, rebellion, and motivation. These five themes were significant in the lives of each of these young adults, contributing to their underachievement.

Chapter 5 contains a discussion of the five themes, their relationships, and their representation in the literature. Existentialism, the conceptual framework selected, receives revisiting with connections from this research. Implications of this study on parents, mental health professionals, and educators appear. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and personal lessons learned.

### **Statement of the Problem and the Purpose**

Few studies (e.g., Grobman, 2006, 2009) have occurred specific to underachievement in the profoundly gifted population, thus indicating a gap in the literature. The purpose of this study was to explore factors that contribute to underachievement in profoundly gifted adolescents.



The four research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are profoundly gifted young adults' personal reflections of their own development during adolescence?
2. What are profoundly gifted young adults' perceptions of barriers and/or supports during adolescence?
3. What are parents' perceptions of their profoundly gifted children's development through adolescence?
4. What are barriers and/or supports for profoundly gifted adolescents as they move into adulthood?

### **Discussion and Connections to the Literature**

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, research is available regarding factors that lead to underachievement among typically gifted children. The goal of this study was to understand more specifically the experiences of underachievement on profoundly gifted adolescents. Data from participant interviews indicated five themes that are factors associated with underachievement. Participants recalled expectations, social issues, mental health issues, rebellion, and motivation as having significant impacts on their development throughout adolescence.

#### ***Expectations***

Data collected from participant interviews showed that perceived and real expectations create pressures on profoundly gifted adolescents that impact social aspects, psychological well-being, and attitudes or responses to expectations imposed by others. External expectations can lead to incredibly troubling inner experiences. Highly intelligent individuals are driven by their interests and often resent the expectations set by

others (Silverman, 2013). This study showed that unhealthy and/or unwanted expectations create internal difficulties, which could be the impetus to painful experiences of anxiety and depression, rebellion, and loneliness. Johnny's experience with moving for his education led to years of depression and rebellious behavior. He was angry and resentful about his parents' decision to relocate. Courtney faced remarkable internal difficulties resulting from years of severe anxiety and limited success. These extremely intense individuals internalized expectations. Parents confirmed that expectations imposed on profoundly gifted adolescents are often unrealistic. Janet shared the uneasiness she felt when her daughter's school expected students to achieve beyond normal expectations for an intelligent person. According to Falck (2020), "Social expectations are often misunderstood by profoundly gifted youth, which leaves them particularly vulnerable to having others rejoice in their misfortune" (p. 90). Falck's finding was evident when Johnny related having peers who expected he would "never make a mistake"; by example, Johnny discussed classmates questioning his giftedness when he made a mistake during a group discussion.

### ***Social Issues***

Profoundly gifted individuals frequently report feeling different, which, according to research, is because they are different (Silverman, 2013). Being different can lead to feelings of disappointment, loneliness, and a lack of connectedness with others (Webb, 2013). Evidence of the disconnect and ensuing loneliness emerged through several participants' responses. Steve expressed tremendous frustration and loneliness because he was unsure about how to interact with his peers. Courtney shared that she felt different

from the girls in her class; they didn't want to be friends with her, and she didn't know how to change that.

Individuals with intelligence in the highest ranges struggle to connect with others, putting them at risk for social difficulties (Hafenstein, Honek, & Tung, 2011; Silverman, 2013). The profoundly gifted adolescents who participated in this study considered social competence and making and having friends to be more important than academics. Participants expressed resentment over the lack of social experiences during adolescence, which they said created feelings of isolation and loneliness. Sandra resented her parents for homeschooling her. Johnny spent years depressed because he longed for the social aspects of his previous school. Several young adults explained that school was important for the profoundly gifted, but only for learning how to socialize and relate to others. Suffering rejection from peers created the perception of being in some way deficient. The young adults felt they had inadequate opportunities to interact and develop critical interpersonal skills. As a result, the reality of being out of sync with their peers and feeling misunderstood became a constant internal battle. The identified need for social skills is critical to recognize because, typically, parents and educators focus on providing challenging academic experiences; this research indicates that for some profoundly gifted adolescents, social relationships are more important than academics. For example, Sandra stated that school was important to “learn how to be a human being.”

Difficulties relating to peers lead some profoundly gifted adolescents to sacrifice parts of themselves to fit in. Having a circle of friends does not create a sense of belonging, as some profoundly gifted youth reported still feeling misunderstood and

unable to express themselves. The impacts of social difficulties are severe, as Falck (2020) noted: “[The] feeling of not fitting in, not belonging with a group, is painful and anxiety-provoking” (p. 83). Steve illustrated this point when he explained, “[School] was isolating because even when I had a circle of friends, I didn’t feel very understood or able to express myself very much.”

Silverman (2013) stated, “Life scripts are formed in childhood, and feelings of alienation seeded in early years can haunt the gifted throughout their lifespan” (p. 20). Profoundly gifted individuals continue to struggle with interpersonal relationships into adulthood. Several parents said they recognized their child was different from a very early age. Allison and her husband knew Courtney was “not normal” during preschool. Allison recalled reports from her daughter’s teacher that, when the other children would get frustrated with the difficulty of puzzles and walk away, Courtney would stay and put them back together before putting them away. The difficulties from preschool have followed Courtney into young adulthood, as she still lacks friends. Unfortunately, profoundly gifted individuals continuously encounter choices that require them to deny their gifts or suffer the rejection of others (Lovecky, 1986).

### ***Mental Health Issues***

The effects of social difficulties can include debilitating mental health struggles. Experiences for profoundly gifted individuals are painful, and over time, a lack of belonging is associated with psychological effects (Falck, 2020). Mental health challenges can arise for various reasons. Based on this research, expectations and social difficulties appear to have a direct impact on mental health. Participants in this study indicated that anxiety and depression represented a significant barrier to achievement.

Sandra shared that she is now, in her mid-twenties, achieving what seem like milestones, such as booking a dentist appointment, moving without the help of her parents, and finally taking a road trip with friends that she never thought would have been possible. She still has no plans to return to the university, however.

Change and other traumatic experiences present difficulties for profoundly gifted adolescents who are predisposed to mental health challenges. Participants recalled with irritation difficult experiences resulting from educational decisions. Johnny resented his parents for relocating to another state for school, and Sandra begrudged her parents' decision to homeschool. These life changes resulted in severe periods of anxiety and depression, considerably impacting academic achievement. Depression develops from feeling different, misunderstood, and generally out of sync with expectations from the environment (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). Research from this study confirmed that the lack of social interaction led to feelings of loneliness and depression. Social expectations are difficult for profoundly gifted adolescents to satisfy, and when unsuccessful, the emotional pain can result in depression.

Anxiety created periods of low motivation, self-doubt, and dread for the participants in this study. In some cases, such as with Courtney, the anxiety was so overwhelming that it interfered with her ability to attend school. Profoundly gifted adolescents feel experiences intensely; anxiety results from insecurity about their environments. Sandra shared disturbing experiences of drinking to calm her fears about “not knowing what to do,” having no idea that she was so unprepared to manage life on her own.

### ***Rebellion***

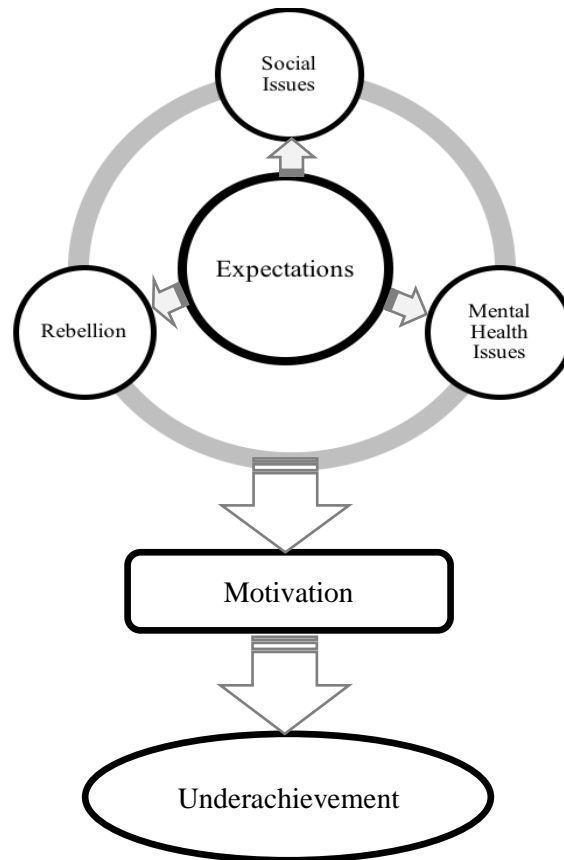
Profoundly gifted adolescents have an intense need for autonomy, and any attempts to limit it might result in rebellion. Rebellion for these participants primarily resulted from their need to retain autonomy. According to Webb (2013), extremely intelligent individuals “will respond aversely to absolute power and formalities” (p. 36); the drive to understand and find truth will exceed their need to obtain high academic achievement. The results of this study indicate that when profoundly gifted adolescents feel their autonomy threatened, the reaction will be to reject all attempts to control or direct them. Individuals’ responses can be extreme and defiant. Research has shown the need to protect autonomy, even if the adverse reaction threatens to sabotage achievement or any measurable success. Hillary and Johnny performed poorly and ultimately dropped out of college due to their rebellious attitudes.

### ***Motivation***

Some profoundly gifted adolescents struggle with maintaining motivation. Passion and drive are essential motivators for profoundly gifted youth; thus, things deemed unimportant or without meaning could be met with resistance and low motivation. This research study confirmed that, for profoundly gifted adolescents, expectations, anxiety, depression, and social difficulties impact motivation and achievement.

This research study produced five themes that are interrelated and synergistic. Expectations, whether perceived or real, could create pressure, eliciting negative behavioral responses that interfere with achievement. Individuals might internalize these expectations, which can then lead to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Expectations can also create social issues when social expectations are misunderstood or not understood at all, resulting in feelings of isolation and loneliness. Expectations imposed by others—those that are not for the self—can often lead to rebellious attitudes and actions. Expectations, mental health affect motivation, which can result in underachievement.



**Figure 5.1:** Factors that Contribute to Underachievement

Profoundly gifted individuals are incredibly multifaceted. Due to the complexity of their thoughts and emotions, accurate accounts of their experiences may be elusive. The goal of this study was to explore the factors associated with underachievement among profoundly gifted adolescents. The gap in understanding regarding this vulnerable population leaves them on their own to address difficulties they do not know how to

resolve. This researcher sought to raise awareness regarding the complexity of issues facing profoundly gifted adolescents. The findings from this study indicate that expectations of this population have significant implications for the future, including extreme underachievement. The damaging effects of imposed expectations cannot be underestimated. This study has provided additional information regarding the far-reaching effects of expectations on the psychological well-being and, ultimately, the achievement of profoundly gifted adolescents. Additionally, the findings from this research contribute to the limited body of existing knowledge.

### **Conceptual Frameworks Revisited**

#### ***Erickson: Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development***

Cross (2001) suggested that gifted individuals move through developmental stages earlier than their same-age peers, which creates challenges. According to Erickson, individuals must successfully master each developmental stage before advancing to the next one. Gifted adolescents tend to develop their sense of self through their interactions with groups of people (Cross, 2001).

Erickson's stage of intimacy versus isolation corresponds with young adulthood, ages 19 to 35 years. This stage is particularly difficult for gifted young adults because "kindred spirits" are hard to find (Fiedler, 2012). During this phase of development, the young adult is searching for meaningful friendships and relationships, which can be quite challenging (Silverman, 1997). Janet explained that her daughter, Sandra, has experienced difficulties with relationships; however, now that her daughter is in her mid-twenties, Janet has recently seen tremendous growth. Allison shared that she wishes her daughter had friends and the opportunity to engage in "irresponsible behavior" like other



young adults, but Courtney does not have friends with whom to be irresponsible. Steve had to focus on his social life as a young adult, learning how to build friendships. He said he is making progress, sharing an example of building friendships with his college classmates through collaboration on assignments.

Isolation is a particular problem for gifted young adults because connections that lead to intimacy are limited (Fiedler, 2012). The inability to form meaningful connections with others has the potential to impede the mastery of this developmental stage. This research study indicated the issue of social connection as a significant barrier to achieving intimacy.

### ***Asynchronous Development***

Asynchronous development affects the profoundly gifted in various aspects of their lives. Being significantly different from one's peers creates an internal disequilibrium that can seem insurmountable. Because profoundly gifted youth do not follow the patterns of typically developing adolescents, their needs might be overlooked. According to Tolan (2007), gifted individuals reach milestones on a schedule distinct to their development, which often leaves them feeling out of sync with societal expectations. This research study showed that asynchrony appears in the differences that make highly intelligent adolescents appear unusual to their peers. The nonacceptance is confusing to gifted individuals because they have no idea why they are unsuccessful in making friends; rather, they feel rejected for being themselves. Profoundly gifted adolescents are then unsure of how to relate to peers. By example, Steve, one of the young adult participants, explained that the hardest part of adolescence was the "social

stuff” because he had no idea how to talk to his peers. He wished he could connect with them more but was not sure how to do so.

This study confirmed that profoundly gifted individuals feel different from their chronological peers. Evidence came from participants regarding the many challenges posed by their asynchrony. The young adults—especially Sandra and Steve—described feelings of being exhausted, lonely, isolated, and different as obstacles to positive adolescent development. This research indicates that social and emotional difficulties associated with asynchronous development are contributing factors to underachievement.

### ***Existentialism***

When considering existentialism as a conceptual framework for this research, several connections appeared between this study and the literature. Existentialism is a familiar concept among the profoundly gifted. At very young ages, profoundly gifted children begin to struggle with existential issues (Webb, 2013). As they move into adolescence, these individuals realize they are participants in an absurd, arbitrary, meaningless world and begin to question authority, rules, and traditions (Webb, 2013). The realization occurs around the time youth have the freedom to determine their meaning and values.

Sartre’s notion of authenticity is that “existence precedes essence,” which asserts that man lives his life first before his essence is determined (Wartenberg, 2008). Fundamentally, individuals’ choices define them; accordingly, people must take responsibility for the choices they make. One participant, Hillary, reflected this belief in assuming responsibility for her choices. She takes a “practical view” about her failures, accepting that “when I have failed at something, it has been my fault entirely.” Johnny

similarly takes responsibility, knowing that rejecting the expectation that he attends college now could create obstacles in the future. He said, “It could bite me, and one day, I might be interested in something that does require a college education and metrics and all that stuff.” Views held by these participants were consistent with existentialism. Themes of “existence precedes essence and authenticity” were evident in profoundly gifted participants’ desires to make their own choices.

Profoundly gifted adolescents have an intense drive for authenticity and autonomy, as indicated through statements made by the participants in this study. Steve shared his experience in college regarding his capstone project. Being advised to create “fake” data for his project was disappointing. He did not see the point of completing the research if it was not going to contribute to any existing body of knowledge; instead, he refused to use data that could not be “sourced and cited.”

These profoundly gifted youth all shared the same sentiment that there is importance in reaching the point where one is content with the choices made about life. Hillary shared that she was unlikely to make a lot of money with the degree she has chosen; however, money is not what is most important. Hillary said she is “content figuring things out” and learning what she finds essential. Her desire is to learn what she is curious about, not to worry about the expectations of others.

Authenticity is about finding one’s true self, what holds meaning in one’s life, and living free of external influences. Living a life ‘true to self’, for these individuals, primarily refers to choices made and the accountability associated with those decisions. Courtney spoke of authenticity when she pushed back on her father’s statement that she was too smart to be a professional piercer. She disagreed with his response, stating, “Just

because I was born smart doesn't mean I have an obligation to have a smart job.”

Courtney believes her only requirement is to have a job that is satisfying and fulfilling.

Highly intelligent individuals need to perceive value in any endeavor they undertake. Johnny decided not to complete his university degree because he does not presently see the worth. Although he is open to the possibility of returning in the future when he needs more specialized education or training, Johnny refuses to attend college now just because it is an expectation of others. Sandra shared her thoughts on having found endeavors that she finds worthwhile. She is actively involved in pursuits aimed at improving her community.

Profoundly gifted individuals will perceive inconsistencies and absurdities in the values and behaviors of others (Webb, 2013). Because they are divergent thinkers, they face challenges in how to live life authentically when there are so many pressures to conform. It is necessary to reject those pressures to express the true self and have a meaningful existence (Falck, 2020).

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study, the first of which was the small sample size due to the limited number of available participants. Profoundly gifted individuals are rare in the population, including only those scoring at the 99.9th percentile on a standardized IQ measure. This subset of gifted individuals lies within an already small subset of the general population of gifted students who score at the 98th percentile. In addition to the limited population size, the target ages of 18 to 25 years further limited the pool of participants. Chapter 1 indicated that identifying a sufficient sample could create an obstacle to collecting sufficient data. This researcher's experience

with data collection confirms the difficulty of locating participants willing to discuss underachievement. The reluctance was likely due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Discussing such intense experiences with underachievement left individuals from this study feeling a sense of vulnerability.

Another limitation to this study was the restricted access of the researcher to participants. Scheduling interviews was a significant obstacle to completing this study. Had the researcher had longer engagement with the participants over the course of a few interviews to build greater trust and rapport, more information about the struggles of these young people might have emerged. Additionally, neither parent of one young adult participant agreed to an interview.

### **Implications**

The construct of profoundly gifted is neither recognized nor understood outside of the gifted community. A better understanding of these individuals' unique thought patterns and behaviors will require further research and clinical observations. There is a need to increase awareness and education about the needs of the profoundly gifted.

### ***Parents***

Parents of profoundly gifted children need to understand the impact of unrealistic or unwanted expectations on the profoundly gifted. The impact can be devastating because these intense individuals already hold high expectations for themselves. Parents, therefore, should be careful not to create expectations around everything at which their child excels. Additionally, parents need to follow up with their children to ensure they have healthy expectations of themselves and have not negatively internalized the expectations of others. Parents of profoundly gifted adolescents require additional

information regarding underachievement. There is a need to better understand how the factors identified in this and other studies contribute to the phenomenon. These findings can provide parents with additional information, insight, and perspective to support their child's development.

### ***Educators***

Gifted underachievers are not alike. As the level of giftedness increases, the risk of experiencing intellectual, social, and emotional problems will likewise increase (Kline & Meckstroth, 1985). Educators need to be aware of the unique needs of the profoundly gifted. When a child shows extreme intelligence, educators should not overemphasize meeting the academic needs of their students, who want to have successful social experiences and interactions. This research shows that, at least for the participants, social experiences were equally or more important than academics.

Findings from this study indicate that educators' expectations have serious impacts. Low expectations for profoundly gifted adolescents result in contempt, rebellion, and low motivation. When teachers raise expectations to a level commensurate with students' abilities and interests, motivation is likely to increase along with achievement.

### ***Mental Health Professionals***

The profoundly gifted adolescent is more susceptible to developing mental difficulties than any other ability group above the norm (Hollingworth, 1942). The risk of problems for this group requires mental health professionals to recognize the unique and specific needs of this population. Professionals need to better understand how the profoundly gifted experience differs from that of typically developing or moderately

gifted adolescents. The way profoundly gifted individuals experience life requires professionals to be flexible in their therapeutic approach with this population.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The first suggestion for future research would be to conduct a similar study targeting an older population of profoundly gifted adults ages 30 to 45 years. The participants in the current study were just transitioning into adulthood. Gifted adults who have underachieved would be able to offer a more mature perspective on factors that may have impacted their achievement. With more time to reflect on life experiences, the additional perspective would be insightful.

Another suggestion for additional research is to examine the adverse effects of expectations on profoundly gifted adolescents. Based on this study, expectations have serious impacts on the personal and academic achievements of the profoundly gifted. The implications of expectations from various aspects of the environment deserve further study, possibly through longitudinal research following young adults into mid- and late adulthood.

Studies are needed that explore achievement in profoundly gifted adults specifically during the developmental periods of young and mid-adulthood. Research focusing on profoundly gifted *achieving* adults could advance understanding around what motivates these individuals to achieve. Research investigating Jungian analysis associated with the shadow side of giftedness would also be beneficial to further understand the internal difficulties associated with hiding or denying parts of the “self”.

Future research is warranted to examine the impacts of mental health issues on underachievement. Findings from this study indicate that there are serious consequences

from mental health difficulties on achievement among profoundly gifted youth. Such research could provide parents, educators, and mental health professionals critical information necessary to support profoundly gifted youth as they transition into adulthood. Additional insight regarding this phenomenon can be used to equip profoundly gifted youth, and those that support them, with the tools necessary in academic decisions, career choices, and personal adjustments.

Finally, it is suggested that additional research be conducted on underachievement in profoundly gifted children, particularly examination of the perspectives children have regarding expectations. Further research around the internalization of expectations young children experience could provide additional insight on how expectations impact profoundly gifted children prior to adolescence. Although full IRB would be necessary for a study involving children, the insight could lead to possible interventions that prevent underachievement from occurring.

### **Closing Comments**

Through this research process, it became evident that unreasonable expectations can cause great harm. Parents of profoundly gifted children should seriously consider and carefully convey the expectations they have for their children; otherwise, there could be repercussions of social and emotional difficulties. Unfortunately, many parents of profoundly gifted children have learned this risk too late. The goal of the researcher was to provide studied information surrounding underachievement among these dynamic individuals. By sharing the stories of the young adults and their parents, the study adds knowledge to the limited literature on profoundly gifted adolescent underachievement experiences.



Interestingly, the concept of underachievement creates unease within the profoundly gifted community, something especially evident during the recruitment process. Few individuals who identified as underachievers were willing to discuss their experiences. Parents were also uncomfortable with the concept of underachievement. Members of the support group debated how to identify underachievement. Some responses from parents supported the experiences shared by several participants around unreasonable expectations. Expectations on these extremely intelligent adolescents created insecurities for both parents and children. Sharing personal experiences viewed as failures was not something individuals or their parents were eager to do. The struggles of underachievement are intense for the profoundly gifted; they are not supposed to underachieve, and they know it. Failure can be devastating to self-esteem, affecting them in myriad ways.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this study was personal. I cannot understate the emotional toll this research has taken on my life personally. It has been a process of self-discovery, which was both painful and rewarding. I feel privileged to have met each of these participants and to have received a glimpse of their struggles. I am honored that they opened up to me and shared their very personal and sometimes painful recollections of growing up profoundly gifted. Several participants expressed their gratitude for the experience of reflecting on their lives. My hope is that the interview and the necessary reflection on life experiences were positive endeavors.

*“To continue to hear the flowers singing and to turn visions and dreams to reality throughout an entire lifetime is a goal to be desired by every adult.” —Lovecky, 1986*

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## **Appendix A: Community Partner Letter**

### **Community Partner Agreement**

Shannon Harrison and Marisa Soto-Harrison

Beginning fall 2019, Shannon Harrison will be Marisa Soto-Harrison's community partner for her research and dissertation project for the Doctorate of Education in Gifted Education at the University of Denver under the supervision of Dr. Norma Lu Hafenstein. The doctorate is part of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). A key component of the requirements is obtaining a community partner. Researchers must disseminate their work to interested community members as indicated by the nature of the research. Community partners can attend (via the Internet) the defense of the dissertation, which will occur in spring 2020 for approximately 2 hours; however, they are not required to attend.

Ms. Harrison agrees to communicate via e-mail and/or telephone throughout this research project. Ms. Harrison will be available for consultation, will discuss research progress periodically, and will participate in the dissemination of research findings upon the completion of the study. The purpose of this project is to examine the lived experiences of underachieving profoundly gifted students.

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Shannon Harrison  
Davidson Academy

Marisa Soto-Harrison  
Researcher, University of Denver

## **Appendix B: First Interview Protocol with Adolescent Participant**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me for this interview. My name is Marisa Soto Harrison, currently a doctoral student at the University of Denver. Today is [day], [month] [date], [year] and I will be interviewing [participant]. The purpose of this interview is to explore and understand factors that may lead to underachievement.

We will spend the next hour and a half to two hours discussing your experiences with underachievement. By signing the consent form you agree that I have permission to record and transcribe this interview. I will also take extensive notes during this interview. The information and data from this interview will be used for a doctoral research project which may be published in the future. This interview recording and transcript will not be accessible to anyone other than me and will be stored in a secure location. The information from this interview will not be shared with anyone.

Any questions? Great, let's begin.

1. Tell me about yourself: Where did you grow up? How many siblings do you have? Do you have family members that are profoundly gifted?
2. What are your early memories around learning? Were you identified as profoundly gifted at an early age?
3. What are your personal reflections of growing up profoundly gifted? What are reflections on the social aspects of growing up profoundly gifted?
4. From your perspective, having grown up as a profoundly gifted individual, what does profoundly gifted mean to you practically?
5. What positive or negative memories do you associate with early education?
6. How did peer perceptions (pressures/expectations) influence your relationship with academics?
7. When did your feelings and attitudes about school change or shift? How old were you? Was there anything that may have caused this shift?
8. What is your personal experience with the phenomenon of underachievement? Did you experience any doubts about the importance of school? If so, what do are your recollections of those experiences?
9. Do you feel that you have ever struggled to reach your academic potential due to external factors? Do you recall any specific disappointments or disillusionments that may have affected achievement? If so, how did those experiences affect your desire to "achieve" as it is perceived by society?

Thank you again for taking the time to meet for this interview. If you have any additional information you want to share, please email me at the email listed on your copy of the consent form.

I have a few more questions to close:

- When reading your interview, is there anything you would like me to specifically focus on?
- Once the interviews are transcribed, would you like a copy of the transcript?

Once data analysis begins, I will likely be sending you a copy to verify that I have portrayed the information from our interview accurately. Are you willing to read through the interview transcript?

## **Appendix C: First Interview Protocol with Parent Participant**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me for this interview. My name is Marisa Soto Harrison, currently a doctoral student at the University of Denver. Today is [day], [month] [date], [year] and I will be interviewing [participant]. The purpose of this interview is to explore and understand factors that may lead to underachievement.

We will spend the next hour and a half to two hours discussing your child's experiences with underachievement. By signing the consent form, you agree that I have permission to record and transcribe this interview. I will also take extensive notes during this interview. The information and data from this interview will be used for a doctoral research project, which may be published in the future. This interview recording and transcript will not be accessible to anyone other than me and will be stored in a secure location. The information from this interview will not be shared with anyone.

Any questions? Great, let's begin.

1. Tell me about yourself: Where are you from? Where were your children born?
2. What do you like to do during your free time? What types of activities did you enjoy with your children?
3. What are your early memories around your child's learning? When were they identified as profoundly gifted?
4. What positive or negative memories do you have of your child's education?
5. What are your reflections of your child's experience growing up profoundly gifted?
6. When did your child's feelings and attitudes about school change or shift? How old were they when this occurred? Was there anything that may have caused this shift?
7. What was your child's experience with the phenomenon of underachievement?
8. Do you feel that your child struggled to reach their academic potential due to external factors? Do you recall any specific disappointments or disillusionments that may have affected achievement?

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me. If you have any additional information you want to share, please email me at the email listed on your copy of the consent form.

I have a few more questions to close:

- When reading your interview, is there anything you would like me to specifically focus on?
- Once the interviews are transcribed, would you like a copy of the transcript?

- Once data analysis begins, I will likely be sending you a copy to verify that I have portrayed the information from our interview accurately. Are you willing to read through the interview transcript?

## Appendix D: Second Interview Protocol with Adolescents

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me for this interview. My name is Marisa Soto Harrison, currently a doctoral student at the University of Denver. Today is [day], [month] [date], [year] and I will be interviewing [participant]. The purpose of this interview is to explore and understand factors that may lead to underachievement.

We will spend the next hour and a half to two hours discussing your experiences with underachievement. By signing the consent form you agree that I have permission to record and transcribe this interview. I will also take extensive notes during this interview. The information and data from this interview will be used for a doctoral research project which may be published in the future. This interview recording and transcript will not be accessible to anyone other than me and will be stored in a secure location. The information from this interview will not be shared with anyone.

Any questions? Great, let's begin.

### **Question 1:**

In our previous interview you mentioned [*reflection*] from growing up profoundly gifted. Can you tell me more about that experience?

**Question 2:** In our previous interview you mentioned [*experience*]. Can you tell me more about that experience?

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me. If you have any additional information you want to share, please email me at the email listed on your copy of the consent form.

I have a few more questions to close:

- When reading your interview, is there anything you would like me to specifically focus on?
- Once the interviews are transcribed, would you like a copy of the transcript?
- Once data analysis begins, I will likely be sending you a copy to verify that I have portrayed the information from our interview accurately. Are you willing to read through the interview transcript?



## Appendix E: Second Interview Protocol with Parents

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me for this interview. My name is Marisa Soto Harrison, currently a doctoral student at the University of Denver. Today is [day], [month] [date], [year] and I will be interviewing [participant]. The purpose of this interview is to explore and understand factors that may lead to underachievement.

We will spend the next hour and a half to two hours discussing your child's experiences with underachievement. By signing the consent form you agree that I have permission to record and transcribe this interview. I will also take extensive notes during this interview. The information and data from this interview will be used for a doctoral research project which may be published in the future. This interview recording and transcript will not be accessible to anyone other than me and will be stored in a secure location. The information from this interview will not be shared with anyone.

Any questions? Great, let's begin.

### **Question 1:**

In our previous interview you mentioned [*reflection*] from your child growing up profoundly gifted. Can you tell me more about that experience?

**Question 2:** In our previous interview you mentioned [*experience*]. Can you tell me more about that experience?

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me. If you have any additional information you want to share, please email me at the email listed on your copy of the consent form.

I have a few more questions to close:

- When reading your interview, is there anything you would like me to specifically focus on?
- Once the interviews are transcribed, would you like a copy of the transcript?
- Once data analysis begins, I will likely be sending you a copy to verify that I have portrayed the information from our interview accurately. Are you willing to read through the interview transcript?

## Appendix F: Email Recruitment

Hello Mr./Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Marisa Soto-Harrison and I am a student from the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver. I am glad that you have contacted me to learn more about the research study in which your child has agreed to participate.

The research study you have received an invitation to participate in presents the underachievement of profoundly gifted adolescents. The purpose of this study is to examine the contributing factors to underachievement in profoundly gifted adolescents. This study will consist of interviews with participants between the ages of 18 to 25 years and their parents. If you decide to participate in this study, I will ask you to participate in two interviews that will last approximately 90 to 120 minutes. I will schedule these interviews at your convenience and can conduct them in person or online via teleconferencing (Zoom). I will be audio-recording the interviews and will have each interview transcribed. You will have the opportunity to review your transcript to ensure its accuracy.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose whether or not to participate, and your decision will not have an effect on your standing or your child's standing in the support group.

Please contact me with any questions or clarification about your participation in this study. You are free to follow up with an additional e-mail at [Marisa.Soto-harrison@du.edu](mailto:Marisa.Soto-harrison@du.edu), or you can reach me at (954) 425-2087.

## Appendix G: Recruitment Flyer

The University of Denver's Morgridge College of Education is conducting a research study on: **Underachieving Profoundly Gifted Adolescents**. The study will be conducted through personal interviews.

If you are between the **ages of 18 and 25, profoundly gifted** and have experience with at least one period of **underachievement**, you may qualify for this research study examining underachievement among profoundly gifted adolescents. Eligible participants will be asked to participate in two interviews of up to 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted either face to face or online via Zoom.



For more information, please email Marisa Soto-Harrison at [Marisa.Soto-harrison@du.edu](mailto:Marisa.Soto-harrison@du.edu) .

Principal Investigator: Marisa Soto-Harrison, M.Ed.

Faculty Sponsor: Norma Hafenstein, PhD



## Appendix H: Informed Consent for Participation



Consent Version: 08/26/2019

### Consent to Participate in Research

**Study Title:** Underachieving Profoundly Gifted Adolescents

**IRBNet #:** 1452378-1

**Principal Investigator:** Marisa Soto Harrison, MEd

**Faculty Sponsor:** Norma Hafenstein, PhD, Professor, University of Denver

**Study Site:** In-person interviews, location to be determined. Online teleconferencing (Zoom).

**You are being asked to participate in a research study.** Your participation in this research study is voluntary, and you do not have to participate. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before deciding whether or not to participate.

The purpose of this form is to provide you with information that may have an effect on your decision to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will describe the study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to give your permission to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be the means used to record your permission. Your decision to participate in this study will in no way have an effect on your standing in any support group.

#### **Purpose**

You are being asked to participate in the research study Underachieving Profoundly Gifted Adolescents. The purpose of this study is to examine, through the lived experiences of underachieving profoundly gifted adolescents, the contributing factors to underachievement among this population.

If you agree to participate in this research study, the researcher will invite you to sit for two audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews scheduled at your convenience. The researcher will conduct the interviews either in person or via teleconferencing (Zoom).

The interview will last approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. In addition, the researcher will ask you to participate in a follow-up interview that will require an additional hour or two. The follow-up interview will also be scheduled at your convenience.

Interviews will require individuals to discuss aspects of their experiences to address questions such as *What is your personal experience (or your child's) with the phenomenon of underachievement? Do you feel that you (or your child) ever struggled to reach your academic potential due to external factors?*

Participating in this research study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to continue with the interviews, not answer a question, or not be recorded for any reason. Your decision to participate in this study will in no way have an effect on your standing in any support group.

All participants will have the opportunity to read their interview transcripts for accuracy. The researcher will address, correct, or delete any information deemed inaccurate.

### **Risks or Discomforts**

Potential risks, stress, and discomforts of participation may include the possibility that you may find discussing certain issues about your experiences upsetting. In the event that issues arise, participants may contact the following for support.

MentalHealth.gov: SAMHSA 1-877-726-4727

The researcher will keep the audio recordings of the interviews until the completion of the research study. After the completion of the study, the researcher will destroy the audio-recordings and transcripts. You will receive the opportunity to review the transcripts of the audio recordings to confirm accuracy, make changes, and deletions.

### **Benefits**

The benefit that you may reasonably expect to result from this study is that you will help inform members of the profoundly gifted community about issues related to underachieving profoundly gifted adolescents. We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not have an effect on your standing in any group within the profoundly gifted community and support groups.

### **Confidentiality of Information**

The researcher will keep your information secure and unidentifiable throughout the study and following the completion of all of the research. To keep personal information confidential during this study, the researcher will store all of the data in a password-protected, secure computer. The researcher will respect and keep private your identity. The researcher will de-identify any personal information collected and assign each

participant a pseudonym to maintain privacy and confidentiality. Any information presented or published related to this study will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. The researcher will store and password protect the audio-recorded interviews and transcriptions. Upon completion of the study, the researcher will destroy any audio files and transcripts. The researcher will destroy the link between your identifiers and the research data after the records retention period required by state and federal law.

### **Limits to confidentiality**

The researcher will keep all of the information you provide confidential. However, if we learn that you intend to commit acts of harm to yourself or others, including, but not limited to child or elder abuse or neglect, suicide ideation, or threats against others, we must report that to the authorities, as required by law.

The researcher will not use your name in any report and will encrypt and password protect any identifiable research data.

The researcher will assign your responses a code number and will keep the list connecting your name to this code in an encrypted and password-protected file. Only members of the research team will have access to the file. Upon completion of the study and data analysis, the researcher will destroy the list.

With your permission, I would like to audiotape this interview so I can make an accurate transcript. Once I have made the transcript, I will erase the recordings. I will not record your name in the transcript or my notes. I will destroy the research data after the records retention period required by state and federal law.

Because of the nature of the data, deducing your identity may be a possibility; however, there will be no attempt to do so, and the researcher will report your data in a way that will not indicate your identity.

The researcher will not use or share any information collected about you for future research studies.

The researcher will handle the information that you provide in the study confidentially. However, there may be circumstances when the law may require the release or sharing of this information. Representatives from the University of Denver may also review the research records for monitoring purposes.

Government or university staff members sometimes review studies such as this one to make sure they conducted safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, officials may examine your records. The reviewers will protect your privacy and will not use the study records to put you at legal risk of harm.

**Consent to video / audio recording / photography solely for purposes of this research**

This study requires video/audio recording and/or photography. If you do not agree to be recorded, you can still take part in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_ YES, I agree to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

\_\_\_\_\_ NO, I do not agree to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

**Questions**

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study or your participation, please contact Marisa Soto Harrison, Med, at (954) 425-2087 or marisa.soto-harrison@du.edu. You may also contact Dr. Norma Hafenstein, the advisor on this project, with questions at Norma.Hafenstein@du.edu

If you do not feel satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the University of Denver (DU) Institutional Review Board to speak to someone independent of the research team at (303) 871-2121 or e-mail IRBAdmin@du.edu.

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed name of subject**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of subject**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**