UNINSPIRED OR DISENGAGED? A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF
GIFTED MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS ON PROBATION

by

Shanna Nicole Baker

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2001 and high stakes testing, the focus in

education has been on low-achieving students resulting in gifted learners being largely ignored.

Gifted underachievers are often identified as bored or apathetic. Researchers are beginning to

examine gifted students' motivation and engagement, but there is a lack of research examining

why gifted middle school students are uninspired to achieve. The purpose of this

phenomenological study was to understand how gifted middle school students in a Georgia

school district and their parents and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve. Within

the study, four research questions were asked:  (1) How do middle school gifted students

describe the terms "inspired" and "motivation"?  (2) How do middle school gifted students, their

parents and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve? (3) What factors do participants

identify as influencing the lack of inspiration to achieve? (4) What impact does the lack of

inspiration to achieve have on gifted middle school students' academic experiences and

achievements? Data collection methods included student interviews, parent interviews, faculty

interviews, and a student questionnaire. Seven students, seven parents, and five teachers

participated for a total of 17 participants. Data analysis methods included bracketing, In Vivo

coding, establishing patterns, textural description, structural description, and finally describing

the essence of the participants' experiences. Findings yielded two emerging themes: (a) Gifted

Learners Experience Disengagement and (b) Gifted Learners Experience Reengagement.


*Keywords*: gifted education, underachievement, student engagement

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**List of Abbreviations**

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

**Overview**

This chapter provides a background of middle school and gifted education. A description of the researcher's situation to self is included. The problem statement addresses the gap in the literature with the purpose statement addressing how this study could fill this gap. A discussion of the significance of the study, which is grounded in research, is provided. Finally, the research questions and research plan were included as well as delimitations and definitions.

**Background**

Classrooms across the nation are filled with students who bring different personalities, different learning styles, and different learning needs to the class (Allison & Rehm, 2007; Bekebrede, Warmelink, & Mayer, 2011; Mooij, 2008). Meeting the various needs of learners can be overwhelming, but it is essential (Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008). Differentiation is a powerful tool teachers can and should utilize in order to meet these diverse needs (Gardner, 1993; Tomlinson, 1995). Differentiation empowers learners, which leads to academic growth and achievement (Scigliano & Hipsky, 2010). While differentiation in the regular classroom is on the rise, many gifted learners seem to be disengaged in the learning process (Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Powers, 2008). This lack of engagement fosters apathy and boredom (Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011; Powers, 2008). High schools offer Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs that offer a rigorous curriculum which tailors instruction at the higher levels of Blooms Taxonomy. However, gifted learners need a rigorous, engaging education at the middle school level as well.

With the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) across 43 states, these standards will "become a de facto national curriculum that intends to be rigorous and challenging

for all learners" (VanTassel-Baska, 2012, p. 222). Due to the increased rigor in the CCSS from previous state standards, there is an incorrect assumption that "the common core does not require any special differentiation for the gifted since the standards are already high level" (VanTassel-Baska, 2012, p.222). However, VanTassel-Baska (2012) argues that despite the strength of CCSS, the standards are not rigorous enough to meet the needs of gifted learners. As such, there is still a need to ensure that all gifted students receive an equitable education (Merry, 2008).

Over the years an increasing number of parents have become frustrated with the lack of challenge their gifted child has received in the public school (Merry, 2008). An argument consistently heard in gifted education is that gifted students are underserved, especially minorities, and are not challenged academically (Grantham, 2012; Merry, 2008; Tomlinson, 1994). Even though 2001's No Child Left Behind legislation spawned educational reform across the nation, gifted education was given very little focus. With the heavy task of ensuring lower achieving students meet the standards, many gifted students "suffer ennui, frustration and often dissatisfaction with their schooling as a result of not being sufficiently challenged" (Merry, 2008, p. 48).

Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2001 and high stakes testing, the focus in education has been on low achieving students resulting in gifted learners being largely ignored. Gifted underachievers are often characterized bored or apathetic (Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011; Powers, 2008). Researchers are beginning to examine motivation in and engagement of gifted students (Caraisco, 2007; Kanevsky, 2011), but there is a lack of research examining why gifted students are uninspired to achieve. In order to meet the needs of these uninspired gifted students, it is vital that these students are able to voice why they are (or seem to be) uninspired.

**Situation to Self**

As a professional educator and novice researcher, constructivism largely shapes my approach to knowledge and learning. It is through this constructivist lens that I conducted research and analyzed the resulting data. According to Creswell (2013), researchers with an axiological philosophical assumption voices and reports their values and biases as well as the value-laden nature of data collected. It is this philosophical assumption with which I identify. My passion for gifted education is ignited by both personal and professional reasons.

As a mother of a fifth grade son who is gifted, I witness his excitement for learning on a daily basis. He is a sponge who soaks up new information and is always eager to learn more. As a teacher of eighth grade gifted students, I see students who are bored and are going through the motions. Why do these gifted students willingly embrace excitement for learning and achievement in the early elementary years yet abandon that desire in middle school? While many educators can theorize why this happens, I wanted to provide an avenue for the middle school student voice to answer this all too important question.

Over the course of my career as a teacher of gifted middle school students, I have witnessed gifted students who appeared to be highly motivated to achieve while others have lacked motivation beyond maintaining gifted eligibility. Recently, I received a thank you card from a former student who was graduating high school one night and graduating from a two-year college the following evening. This particular student will attend Georgia Institute of Technology as an 18-year-old junior. While this student's thank you card encouraged my heart and made me proud, I was reminded of another student who was just as intelligent, but was barely passing my class much less meeting gifted eligibility requirements. Why was one student

motivated and inspired to achieve while another seemed to be uninspired and unmotivated to achieve beyond the minimum required?

With a shift to Common Core Standards, more teachers have directed their focus to an increase in rigor in the classroom. As a teacher leader in gifted education at the school level, I work with other teachers to increase the rigor for their gifted students. In order to meet the needs of all middle school gifted learners, it is important that I understand how and why some gifted learners are not academically inspired to achieve.

## Problem Statement

The problem is there is a dearth of research examining why select gifted middle school students are uninspired to achieve. Due to No Child Left Behind (2001) and high stakes testing, education has focused on low achieving students while gifted students are largely ignored. Gifted underachievers are characterized as bored or apathetic (Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011; Powers, 2008). Researchers are beginning to examine gifted students' motivation and engagement (Caraisco, 2007; Karenevsky, 2011); however, the students' voice is absent from the discourse.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve. For this study, lack of inspiration to achieve was generally defined as gifted students not performing to their potential resulting in academic gifted probation. According to the state of Georgia, a local board of education must have a continuation policy for students receiving gifted services. Gifted students must maintain satisfactory performance in order to maintain eligibility. Failure to maintain satisfactory performance results in a probationary period in which students continue to

receive services while trying to achieve satisfactory performance status (Georgia Department of Education, 2014).

## Significance of the Study

Recent studies (Caraisco, 2007; Gaither, 2008; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011; Powers, 2008; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012) focusing on gifted education have been limited in regards to middle school students. Most of these studies have been predominantly quantitative in nature as well as mixed methods approach (Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011; Powers, 2008). Some studies have attempted to qualitatively examine different aspects of gifted education (Dillon, 2010; Gaither, 2008). Garn and Jolly (2014) focused on gifted students' voice on motivation using the self-determination theory. While the summer program was open to gifted students in grades 3-8, the 15 participants were predominantly elementary with the exception of two seventh grade students. Giving students a voice provides valuable insight to researchers, teachers, and administrators. Just as Garn and Jolly's (2014) qualitative study gave a voice for elementary gifted students, this study attempted to give a voice to middle school gifted students.

This study is significant because it provided the middle school gifted student the opportunity to be heard. In addition, by including parents and faculty participants, the additional voices provided deeper insight to the proposed problem. By understanding why some gifted students are uninspired to achieve, teachers will hopefully be better equipped to meet the needs of these students. The harmony of voices of both gifted students, their parents, and their teachers will lead to more effective teaching practices that could be beneficial to all middle school students. This research may allow teachers and administrators to examine current gifted programs in order to best meet the needs of all gifted students. Additionally, this research could

potentially lead to more extensive studies. This thick, rich data collected in this study will allow greater discourse within the gifted education community. As a result, the findings could potentially transcend gifted education and provide a base line for why many middle school students are uninspired to achieve.

## Research Questions

Current research in gifted education is limited and has primarily focused on addressing the gifted underachievers (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Montgomery, 2009; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014). Several quantitative and mixed methods studies have sought to explain why gifted students are bored or apathetic by examining the impact of differentiation, technology integration, independent study, and AP/IB classes (Caraisco, 2007; Demos & Foshay, 2009; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Karanevsky, 2011; Powers, 2008; van Hooft, 2008). However, most of these studies do not allow for students' voice. Several qualitative studies provide student voice on motivation (Garn & Jolly, 2014), teacher influence (Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014), and gifted dropouts (Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). This researcher sought to understand how some gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve by allowing them to voice their experiences.

Given this background and the purpose of this investigation, the following research questions guided this phenomenological study:

1. How do middle school gifted students describe the terms *inspired* and *motivation*? This question enabled each student participant to clearly define the two key terms this proposed study will examine. While researchers have defined motivation (Ames, 1992; Conradi, Jang, McKenna, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000), it is important for participants to

provide a personal definition.  Participant responses provided a framework, which gave shape to their narrative voice.

2. How do gifted middle school students, their parents, and their teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve?  Quantitative and mixed methods research (Caraisco, 2007; Demos & Foshay, 2009; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Karanevsky, 2011; Powers, 2008; van Hooft, 2008) examined quantities of data to aid in the understanding of gifted education. Qualitative research (Garn & Jolly, 2014; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Zabloski, 2010) in gifted education focused on individual voices that collectively provided a harmonic voice in specified areas of study.  This broad question did not hinder participants' voices, rather it enabled participants to respond without constraint; thus, allowing depth of study as well as identifying any potential commonalities among participants.

3. What factors do participants identify as influencing their lack of inspiration to achieve? Allowing participants to delve deep into their experiences enabled them to express their thoughts without constraint (Garn & Jolly, 2014; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Zabloski, 2010). This question enabled the researcher to connect participants' experiences to the definition of "uninspired" and "motivation". This allowed each participant the opportunity to provide greater detail regarding gifted students' academic experiences.

4. What impact does the lack of inspiration to achieve have on gifted middle school students' academic experiences and achievements?  Motivation is a major factor contributing to achievement (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Siegle & McCoach, 2005; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014). Some educators expect gifted learners to be motivated

(Siegle & McCoach, 2005) leaving the unmotivated, uninspired, and unchallenged to sit in classrooms with little academic success. This question addressed how the lack of inspiration to achieve affected a student's academic experiences, which were typically the more immediate effects, as well as the student's achievement, which were the more long-term effects.

## Research Plan

I sought to understand how gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve. My goal was to describe the essence of this shared experience. With this goal in mind, a transcendental phenomenological research design was used (Moustakas, 1994). In his approach to phenomenological research, Moustakas (1994) highlights three processes that facilitate knowledge: Epoche, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, and Imaginative Variation. Epoche required the researcher to set aside previous understandings and judgments when examining the phenomena. At this point, the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction process began. I had to perceive the phenomena as if for the first time. This approach allowed me to gain a "textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon" (p. 34). This approach was followed by the Imaginative Variation, which aimed to "grasp the structural essences of experience" (p. 35). According to Moustakas (1994), "the structural essences of Imaginative Variation are then integrated with the textual essences of the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction in order to arrive at a textual-structural synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomenon" (p. 36).

## Delimitations and Limitations

This study had some delimitations. This study was delimited to gifted middle school students from a suburban school district in Northeast Georgia, their parents, and their teachers.

To be considered for the study, the student must be identified gifted according to Georgia state guidelines and were or had been on gifted academic probation. According to the state of Georgia, a local board of education must have a continuation policy for students receiving gifted services. Gifted students must maintain satisfactory performance in order to maintain eligibility. Failure to maintain satisfactory performance results in a probationary period in which students continue to receive services while trying to achieve satisfactory performance status (Georgia Department of Education, 2014). Teacher participants were current or former teachers of the student participants. With this criterion in place, the sample size of each participant group, student, parent, and teacher, was 19 or until data saturation was attained, which is recommended by Creswell (2010). The limitations of this study are detailed in Chapter Five.

### Definitions

The following definitions include key terms and are included for clarity and understanding:

- Gifted Probation refers to the period in which students continue to receive gifted services while trying to achieve satisfactory performance status (Georgia Department of Education, 2014).

- Student Voice refers to the active involvement of students who are able to make decisions regarding potential areas of study, products produced, and collaborative efforts on their educational journey (Rogers, 2005).

- Zone of Proximal Development focuses on the range of learning students can complete through collaboration (Zaretskii, 2009).

### Summary

Chapter One provided an overview of the study that has taken place. An examination of the background gifted education and research pertaining to middle school gifted students has been provided. The problem with the lack of qualitative research pertaining to how gifted middle school students are uninspired to achieve has been explained as well as the purpose to fill a gap in the literature relative to gifted middle school students describing the lack of inspiration to achieve. The significance of this study was grounded in current research with considerations of how this study could impact the field of gifted education, educators, administrators, and middle school students. This study resulted in a harmony of voices between gifted students, their parents, and their teachers. The research questions and research plan were included as well as delimitations and definitions.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Overview

This chapter provides a background regarding literature on gifted learning and education. It also provides a theoretical framework for this study as well as an in-depth look at current literature on the topic of motivation, inspiration, and gifted education related to gifted middle school learners. This review examines current literature regarding gifted education theorists, legislation for the gifted, Common Core, and assessment. In addition, it delves into the characteristics of gifted learners by examining topics, which include underachievement, learning needs, differentiation, rigorous and meaningful curriculum, critical thinking skills, technology enriched instruction, individual pacing, independent study, and caring and effective teachers. Furthermore, it examines current research regarding student engagement and self-efficacy.

## Background

Current literature on gifted education has focused largely on examining the engagement or motivation of gifted students. Caraisco (2007), Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, and Choi (2011), Karenevsky (2011), Powers (2008) and Siegle, Rubenstein, and Mitchell (2014) all address different aspects of engaging the gifted student. Caraisco (2007) noted the lack of engagement when gifted learners were given traditional lessons as opposed to the enthusiasm displayed when offered choices, as in the CAP method. Many characterize this lack of engagement as boredom or apathy (Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011; Powers, 2008). Such characterization aligns with the notion that traditional lessons fail to challenge these learners. Others address the role of caring and effective teachers on motivation and engagement (Gentry et al., 2011; Kettler, 2010; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010).  Research clearly indicates that a rigorous and challenging curriculum is needed in order to inspire gifted learners (Gentry et

al., 2011; Kaplan, 2009; Little, 2012; McCoach& Siegle, 2003; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Siegle et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 1995; VanTassel-Baska, 2005; 2011; 2012; Watters, 2010). Some articles make connections with the lack of rigor and apathy as evidence that gifted learners require different instructional strategies than their regular education counterparts (Caraisco, 2007; Gentry et al., 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010). Others argue for the need to integrate technology into the curriculum to stimulate and challenge students, offering more opportunities for creativity and inquiry (An & Reigeluth, 2011; Chen, Lambert, & Guirdy, 2010; Diemer, Fernandez, & Streepey, 2012; Fraga, Harmon, Wood, & Buckelew, 2011; Gadanidis, Hughes, &Cordy, 2011; Geist, 2011; Haydon, Hawkins, Denune, Kimener, McCoy, & Basham, 2012; Houssand & Houssand, 2008; Hsieh, Cho, Liu, Schallert, 2008; Hur & Oh, 2012; Keengwe, Pearson, & Smart, 2009; Kiger, Herro, & Prunty, 2012; Kingsley & Boone, 2008; O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011; Otta & Tavella, 2010; Spires, Lee, Turner, & Johnson, 2008; Watson & Watson, 2011). While leaders in gifted education differ in how to define "giftedness," they are in agreement that gifted students have different learning needs that educators must accommodate (Mooij, 2008; Tomlinson, 1994; 1995; 2003; 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 2005; 2011; 2012).

**Theoretical Framework**

Two leading theorists, Bruner and Vygotsky, provide a theoretical basis for how learners learn as well as how cognitive development takes place. Bruner, a leader in cognitive learning theories, "focuses on the mental processes people use as they acquire new knowledge and skills" (Parkay, Hass, & Anctil, 2010, p. 191). ). Discovery learning (Bruner, 1971), connectedness (Bruner, 1960), and personal meaning (Bruner, 1967) are all associated with cognitive learning theories. An extension of cognitive based learning is constructivism. Students are not passive

learners rather they actively construct their own learning, giving them the opportunity to connect past experiences to new ideas and information, which extends their learning to a higher level. Scaffolding, which allows a differentiated learning experience, is an important instructional strategy that is common in constructivism (Parkay, Hass, & Anctil, 2010). Bruner and Vygotsky's theories have impacted pedagogy, particularly in recent years.

Bruner (1966) argued that knowledge is a process. True instruction is to teach students how to "take part in the process of knowledge-getting" (Bruner, 1966, p. 72). Learning is spiraled knowledge built upon knowledge. As such, learners construct their own learning. Bruner's (1971) discovery learning built on this idea of constructivist learning. While teachers may lead students to discover new knowledge, the essence of discovery learning is students "discovering what is in their own heads" (Bruner, 1971, p. 72). Discovery learning allows students to learn material in the classroom and apply this newly gained knowledge in problem solving (Bruner, 1971).

According to Bruner (1971), learning is individual regardless of teacher-student ratio. In addition, students have different abilities and their ability to process information as well as internalize it is different. Since learning is a process, it is important for educators to teach students how to think as well as meet the needs of the students. Gifted learners do have different cognitive abilities and process information differently than the general student population. As such, it is vital that educators purposefully strive to meet the learning needs of these students (Caraisco, 2007; Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, Choi, 2011; Karenevsky, 2011; Kettler, 2014; Powers, 2008; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Tomlinson, 1995; Watters, 2010).

Social Constructivist Lev Vygotsky viewed social interaction as a fundamental component of cognition. In addition, Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development or

(ZPD) (1978) highlights the need for all students to receive instruction in their ZPD in order for learning growth to take place. Vygotsky's ZPD focuses on the range of learning students can complete through collaboration (Zaretskii, 2009). Essentially, the ZPD describes the "current or actual level of development of the learner and the next level attainable" (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010, p. 238) through adult or peer collaboration. Hence, the ZPD connects the known to the unknown (Subban, 2006).

Differentiation is a "revolution—a fundamentally different way to teach students with diverse learning and behavioral needs" (Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008, p.39). Numerous learning theories abound that support the need for differentiation. While Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory serves as the driving force for differentiating instruction based on learning style, it is Vygotsky's ZPD that supports the need for differentiation. According to E.E. Kravtsova (2009), two essential conclusions are drawn from Vygotsky's theory: education must lead to development, and "what children do today with the help of an adult, they will be able to do tomorrow independently" (Kravtsova, 2009, p.11). Several articles have connected ZPD to critical pedagogical practices. Before examining the connections between ZPD and differentiation, it is necessary to examine how ZPD applies in education.

According to Vygotsky (1978), the division between a student's zone of actual development and the ZPD is the first assignment a student cannot complete independently. A problem situation arises in which collaboration and instruction in the ZPD between the teacher and student helps the student to succeed. Due to this collaboration, the student is capable of working independently in the future. Zaretskii (2009) suggests two zones border the ZPD: "on one side, the border passes through the point at which children are capable of acting independently, and on the other, where they cannot operate successfully even with adult

collaboration" (p.78). Even though students are not capable of performing independently within the ZPD, understanding is still possible with appropriate and meaningful collaboration. It is through this meaningful collaboration that the student's development grows. In addition to collaboration, Zaretskii (2009) suggests that reflection is an important component. Teaching students to reflect on their learning—including their mistakes—leads them to overcome difficulty on their own and, as a result, promotes development.

Research (Bozhovich, 2009; Zaretskii, 2009) provides two key ideas that would easily connect how differentiated instruction can impact student engagement and achievement. The idea of the two zones on either side of the ZPD—the zone of actual development and the zone of insurmountable difficulty—is the needed justification for differentiation. Students must receive instruction and collaboration within the ZPD for development to occur. If the instruction is in either of the other two zones, then development will never occur. Teachers must determine the ZPD of a student and target instruction for that area, which is differentiation. Another key element is the need for reflection. This ties neatly into differentiation. Students and teachers both reflect on two key questions: what works and why and why did you make mistakes. This allows students to evaluate their own learning, and teachers can determine how to adjust instruction to meet student needs. Ultimately, targeting instruction to a student's ZPD provides each child the opportunity for academic growth as well as increasing student achievement. Arguably, this potentially leads to greater engagement.

### Gifted Education Theorists

Bruner and Vygotsky's views on education align with the leaders of gifted education such as Mooij (1999; 2008), Tomlinson (1994; 1995; 2005), and VanTassel-Baska (1998; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006). As leading gifted theorists, Mooij, Tomlinson, and VanTassel-Baska provide

an understanding of gifted learners as well as ways that educators must meet their needs cognitively and pedagogically. Their theories align with and build upon Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Bruner's concept of inquiry and development.

Gifted learners differ from their peers in regards to "their development potential, actual competencies, self-regulatory capabilities, and learning styles" (Mooij, 2008, p. 1).  Gardner (1993) argues instruction should be delivered in multiple ways that align with seven distinct learning styles. The underlying theme of all gifted education theorists is the need for curriculum and instructional support that aligns with gifted learners' "potentials and abilities, self-regulatory capabilities and motivation" (Mooij, 2008, p. 2). Tomlinson (1994) argues that schools need to develop and stretch the cognitive abilities of all learners and avoid accepting mediocrity by allowing gifted learners to coast through non-challenging curricular.

Regardless of how theorists define "giftedness", it is evident that gifted students need more challenge and rigor with a different instructional approach than the traditional curriculum. Purcell et al. (2002) identified a gap between available curricula for gifted students and their learning needs. Klimis and VanTassel-Baska (2013) suggest gifted students require curriculum that is not only comprehensive but includes continuous differentiation in order to develop their abilities. In addition, VanTassel-Baska (2013) examines the importance of performance-based assessments for gifted learners. When faced with challenging performance tasks, gifted learners have the opportunity to reveal intellectual ability (VanTassel-Baska, 2013).  Educators cannot simply focus on the at-risk, low-achieving students, rather they must focus equally on excellence for all students.

## Reality of Gifted Education In Schools

**Legislation for the Gifted**

In 1998, Congress passed the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act to meet the educational needs of gifted and talented learners. In 1993, a report by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement raised concerns about the lack of rigor in public school curriculum for gifted students. This news was compounded by American students scoring lower on international tests compared to other countries. Following the report, the Javits Act was reauthorized in 1994 with the hopes of meeting the needs of gifted and talented learners. Most recently, the Javits Act was reauthorized as part of 2001's No Child Left Behind legislation.

Funding is prioritized to increase service to underrepresented groups—minorities, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners. In addition, the Javits Act funds the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. Each year Congress must approve funding. In recent years, legislators discussed cutting funding. Unlike Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), the Javits Act only provides limited funding but does protect the legal rights of gifted and talented learners. While advocates push for a more extensive national mandate, misconceptions of needs gifted learners abound. As a result, gifted and talented students remain largely ignored.

**Impact of NCLB**

Passage of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 dramatically changed the landscape of public education. The NCLB federal mandate pushed for improving test scores and increasing the high school graduation rate. At the state and local level, the educational lens zoomed in on low achieving learners and students with disabilities. Since Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) centered on minimal competency, there was not a need for targeting high ability students. As a result, curriculum and instruction have targeted low ability learners while allowing gifted learners to languish in classrooms that lack challenging and rigorous curricular. Tomlinson

(1994) warned that rewarding effortless achievement of gifted learners is actually "commending mediocrity rather than excellence" (p. 52). It is in the era of NCLB that gifted education has been relegated to the sidelines with limited federal support. While the intent of NCLB was to provide educational equity to all learners, it has, in actuality, created the same education for all learners.

**Common Core State Standards**

In 2009, the National Governors Association led an initiative to create a "uniform set of academic standards for English language arts and mathematics" (WICHE, 2011, p. 2). The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative began in order to ensure all children are prepared for college as well as the workforce. Since standards varied across the nation and to prevent learning gaps as a results of student movement across states, the CCSS defined the required knowledge and skills all students should gain in their K-12 career. Ultimately, the goal of Common Core is academic success for each and every student.

With the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) across forty-six states (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), these standards will "become a de facto national curriculum that intends to be rigorous and challenging for all learners" (VanTassel-Baska, 2012, p. 222). Due to the increased rigor in the CCSS from previous state standards, there is an incorrect assumption that "the common core does not require any special differentiation for the gifted since the standards are already high level" (VanTassel-Baska, 2012, p.222). However, VanTassel-Baska (2012) argues that despite the strength of CCSS, the standards are not rigorous enough to meet the needs of gifted learners. As such, there is still a need to ensure that all gifted students receive an equitable education (Kettler, 2014; Merry, 2008).

Both the Chief State School Officers (CSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA) recognize that some students will require acceleration; however, according to VanTassel-Baska (2012) there is a need to "enrich the standards by ensuring that there are open-ended opportunities to meet the standards through multiple pathways, more complex thinking applications, and real-world problem-solving contexts" (p. 223). In addition, VanTassel-Baska (2012) argues for differentiated assessments as gifted students will need to be "assessed through performance-based and portfolio techniques that are based on higher level learning outcomes than common core may employ" (p. 223). Even though the National Association for Gifted Children advocates for differentiated assessments suggested by VanTassel-Baska (2012), the educational assessment lens is still focused on low achieving students.

**Assessment**

Most current standardized high-stakes tests focus on minimal competency or basic skills. With the adoption of Common Core State Standards, new assessments are currently in development with a focus on performance-based tasks as "a way to judge the acquisition of higher level skills like developing argument" (VanTassel-Baska, 2013, p. 41) resulting in the need to incorporate performance-based assessments into classroom instruction. Performance-based assessments for gifted learners should go beyond simple recall with an emphasis on critical thinking (VanTassel-Baska, 2013). Furthermore, high expectations of students' performance should be conveyed in the rubric in order to achieve the best product possible (Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; VanTassel-Baska, 2013; Watters, 2010). VanTassel-Baska (2013) argues for multiple approaches to collecting student data for gifted learners allowing for a comprehensive look of student performance.

**Factors Impacting Gifted Learners**

Researchers agree that gifted learners are cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally different from their regular education peers (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Coleman & Cross, 2001; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Kettler, 2014; McCollister & Sayler, 2010; Mooij, 2008; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Tomlinson, 1994; 1995; 2003; 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 2003; 2004; 2005; 2011; 2012). Gifted and talented learners are not only different from their age-group peers, but will also possess different characteristics among the gifted and talented population (Burner, 1971; Mooij, 2008). Regardless, gifted students will demonstrate high performance in the defined areas included in the federal definition of gifted and talented students:

> 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 (Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, 1994).

In order to meet the learning needs of gifted learners, it is vital that educators understand the different characteristics that are generally common among gifted learners.

Researchers in gifted education have identified key characteristics that most gifted learners will possess. Such characteristics include detailed memory; analogical thinking and problem solving; curiosity; precocious language; advanced communication skills; divergent thinking; visionary; adventurous; intuitive; sense of humor; responsible; and self-confident (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Coleman & Cross, 2001; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Johnsen, 2003; Mooij, 2008; Tomlinson, 1994; 1995; 2003; 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 1998; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2011; 2012).

**Underachievement.**

Motivation is a major factor contributing to achievement (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Siegle & McCoach, 2005; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014). Some educators expect gifted learners to be motivated (Siegle & McCoach, 2005) leaving the unmotivated and unchallenged to sit in classrooms with little academic success. These gifted learners appear to lack motivation resulting in lower academic achievement.

Underachievement is the common terminology when the "estimated potential of individuals is not realized in their achievements" (Montgomery, 2009, p. 3). Underachievement can occur at any stage in life, but is most apparent during the K-12 years. Researchers suggest there are contributing factors to underachievement (McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Montgomery, 2009; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014). Common factors associated with gifted underachievers include students' perceptions, attitudes, and motivation (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Montgomery, 2009; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996; Siegle et al., 2014).  Montgomery (2009) discusses external factors such as schools with low expectations, curriculum that lacks needed instructional strategies to meet gifted needs, and home environments that fail to provide the needed familial support. Peterson and Colangelo (1996) discussed how familial support affects episodic underachievement whereas systemic factors lead to chChrisic underachievement.  Systemic factors include "adverse socioeconomic conditions, which can include poverty, low motivation, language problems, and ethnic differences" (Peterson & Colangelo, 1996, p. 400).

Several researchers place the blame of underachievement on the doorstep of public school education (Agne, 2001; Mooij, 1999; Tomlinson, 1994). Public school education groups learners by age rather than ability, which can stifle learning (Agne, 2001; Mooij, 1999). According to Mooij (1999), often "a gifted child is not doing well because he or she may be

forced to underachieve" (p. 63). While education should enable each child to reach his or her potential cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally (Bruner, 1971; Mooij, 1999), this is rarely the case.

Too often in public schools, gifted learners are rewarded with high grades for tasks that do not challenge them. Vygotsky (1978) would argue that development would never take place due to instruction operating in the zone of actual development. When learning stagnates, complacency soon follows (Agne, 2001). In addition, gifted students, bored with repetitive monotony of stagnated instruction, may misbehave and refuse to complete non-challenging assignments resulting in lower grades (Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010). This can lead to teachers lowering expectations for these students and offering even fewer challenges (Kolb & Jussim, 1994).

**Learning Needs.**

Gifted learners have different learning needs from the general education population as well as differing needs among their gifted peers. Based on a meta-analysis of the needs of gifted learners, Zabloski (2010) identified eight core learning needs: individual attention, challenging curriculum, unique pacing, independent study, higher order thinking skills, technology applications, social interaction, and caring teachers. As such, there is not one single instructional strategy that is a "one-size-fits-all" for gifted learners (Tomlinson, 1994). Even though teacher-to-student ratios continue to rise, it is imperative that learning remains individual (Bruner, 1971) while incorporating collaborative opportunities with an emphasis on real-world connections (Klimis & VanTassel-Baska, 2013).

Academic motivation is an important component of academic success for any student, but is it significant for gifted students since it is a strong predictor of academic achievement for

gifted students (Clemons, 2008; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014). In a study examining gifted achievers and non-achievers, McCoach and Siegle (2003) argue that students are motivated and engaged when they perceive they have the needed skills to complete the task, find meaning in the task, and perceive a supportive environment. Understanding different learning needs of gifted students as well as the impact of a challenging curriculum and effective teachers could lead to increased academic motivation resulting in greater academic achievement (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010).

**Differentiation.**

According to Bruner (1971), education must meet needs of students and stretch their thinking. Gifted learners rarely receive instruction that stretches their cognitive processes, which ultimately prevents them from increasing their cognitive development. Challenging and motivating students is critical for engagement (Bozhovich, 2009; Caraisco, 2007; Gentry,Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011; Kravtsova, 2009; Powers, 2008; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010; Zabloski, 2010; Zaretskii, 2009). In order to address students' needs, teachers "must be able to modify, expand, and/or enrich the curriculum with appropriate learning experiences that acknowledge students' strengths, rather than their deficits in learning" (Demos and Foshay, 2009, p.26). According to Subban (2006), addressing "student differences and interest appears to enhance their motivation to learn while encouraging them to remain committed and positive" (p. 938).

At the heart of differentiation is adaptability of content, process, and product based on student need and learning style (Levy, 2008).  Content is the curriculum. Each student must be taught the same curriculum and show competency on standard-based assessments. However, the curriculum may be "quantitatively or qualitatively" (Levy, 2008, p. 162) different.  While

content focuses on the "what" of teaching, process focuses on the "how"—how teachers teach and how learners learn. Differentiating the product—the way students demonstrate what they have learned—is very important. This reflects the expansion of the student's cognitive development.  Because students "vary in their ability levels, learning styles, and areas of interest, the ways in which they demonstrate what they know should vary as well" (Levy, 2008, p. 163).

For the most part, differentiation has been largely implemented with a teacher's sole discretion. Students have some choice within the differentiated guidelines teachers have established, but differentiation takes place based on teacher judgment. Deferential differentiation allows students to become decision-makers in their own learning. According to Kanevsky (2011), "deferential differentiation occurs when curriculum modifications defers to students' learning preferences by recognizing and including them in the design process" (p. 279). Deferential differentiation respects "students' need to engage in educational activities that recognize their learning preferences in their zones of proximal development" (Kanevsky, 2011, p. 280). While deferential differentiation may seem daunting to teachers, many gifted students prefer as well as thrive when they have control over their learning.

An increased focus on differentiation has led to a myriad of research articles (Bozhovich, 2009; Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011; Kravtsova, 2009; Powers, 2008; Scigliano & Hipsky, 2010; Zaretskii, 2009) expounding the benefits of differentiation of which there are many. However, as differentiation has become a focus in general education, it has diminished greatly in gifted education. Too often the mindset of educators in regards to gifted students is that they are self-sufficient learners who are in need of little to no help in completing assignments. As a result, gifted students either struggle because they need assistance, or they become bored and disengaged in the learning process. Therefore, if

gifted students are to become re-engaged with learning, they must become co-pilots in their educational journey.

**Rigorous Curriculum.**

Consistently, advocates of gifted education call for a more rigorous and challenging curriculum (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010). According to VanTassel-Baska (2011), gifted learners are advanced relative to the students in their age group; therefore, there is a need for challenging and advanced curriculum and instruction. Too often, gifted learners are grouped in heterogeneous classes with a non-challenging curriculum and very little differentiation leading to limited opportunities for learning (Little, 2012). Research (Kaplan, 2009; Little, 2012; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; VanTassel-Baska, 2005; 2012) indicates a challenging curriculum includes an accelerated pace as well as greater depth and complexity. In addition to a more challenging curriculum, gifted learners require a learning environment with appropriate support to effectively engage the material (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Little, 2012; Siegle, et al., 2014; VanTassel-Baska, 2013; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010; Watters, 2010). A curriculum that is too challenging is just as ineffective as a curriculum that is too easy, which aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD.

According to research (Caraisco, 2007; Gentry Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Kaplan, 2009; Kanevesky & Keighley, 2003; Little, 2012; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010), unchallenging curriculum contributes to boredom. Educators often view boredom as a simple lack of interest in a topic or activity (Little, 2012); however, Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupinsky, & Perry (2010), argue boredom reflects the learner's lack of value for a topic or activity. A gifted learner's perceived value of the learning experience impacts boredom (Little, 2012; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Siegle, Rubenstein, &

Mitchell, 2014). If the curriculum is under-challenging and students do not perceive any value in the learning process, then boredom will be prevalent.

Several studies (Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011; Powers, 2008) examine how to counteract boredom in the classroom through independent study, AP and IB programs, and learning contracts. Not only do these instructional strategies and curricular allow greater depth and complexity, but the student choice component enables the student to determine the perceived value of the learning task.

In recent studies (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010) high school students voiced the importance of a challenging curriculum. These students wanted "to wrestle with complex ideas, and the complexity itself seemed to help the content gain importance" (Siegle et al., 2014, p. 42). In all three studies, students desired to examine content in depth allowing them to explore topics with greater complexity. In addition, students preferred courses move at a faster pace. The depth and pace of a course added a needed challenge that these students desired. For these students (Gentry et al., 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010), the increased challenge in the curriculum increased the task value of the required learning tasks. Based on research examining different interventions, the task value intervention was most effective in improving achievement (Rubenstein, Siegle, Reis, McCoach, & Burton, 2012; Siegle, Reis, & McCoach, 2006).

**Meaningful Curriculum.**

Aside from a more challenging curriculum, gifted students need a curriculum that is meaningful. When gifted learners find value in a task, they are more likely to be engaged while completing the task (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Little, 2012; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010). Meaningful curriculum allows learners to make personal

connections as well as real-world connections. According to Little (2012), gifted learners may perceive learning tasks "to have utility value and/or intrinsic value" (p. 700). Regardless of the type of value, curriculum tasks with a higher perceived value increases gifted student motivation.

Due to value placed on curriculum, Little (2012) and VanTassel-Baska (2011) suggest educators design curriculum with substantive and meaningful outcomes. In addition, the instructional tasks must be "worthwhile and engaging and should include opportunities for students to reflect on the implications of their learning" (Little, 2012, p. 700). Moreover, the assessment of the learning tasks must provide students an "authentic opportunity to demonstrate their learning" (Little, 2012, p. 700). By incorporating student interests and choice into learning tasks, gifted learners tend to be more engaged and motivated to complete the academic task. In addition, connect curricula to the larger question of why. Gifted learners desire to know the purpose of a specific task including the real world implications (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Little, 2012; O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; van Hooft, 2008; Watters, 2010).

**Critical Thinking Skills.**

Critical thinking is defined as "purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation analysis, evaluation and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which judgment is based" (Facione, 1990, p. 3 as cited in Kettler, 2014). In recent years, critical thinking skills have become more prominent in general education with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. According to Kettler (2014), the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) "reflect a strong commitment to developing critical thinking skills among all

students from kindergarten to Grade 12 through increased emphasis on argumentation and analysis of claims and evidence" (p. 127). As efforts to improve critical thinking skills for all students increase, teachers of gifted learners will need to not only differentiate content, but also critical thinking skills (Kettler, 2014).

Critical thinking skills have been an important component of gifted education (Kettler, 2014; Linn & Shore, 2008; Parks, 2009; Struck & Little, 2011; VanTassel-Baska, Bracken, Feng, & Brown, 2009; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2006). Integration of these skills is vital in order to achieve rigor (McCollister & Sayler, 2010; Tomlinson, 2003). As critical thinking skills become prevalent in general education, the question of whether to differentiate for these skills has arisen. Tomlinson & Allan (2000) and Kettler (2014) suggest that differentiation for any skill requires a pairing of advanced levels of educational readiness with advanced learning experiences. According to McCollister & Sayler (2010), differentiation of critical thinking skills allows teachers to engage and challenge gifted students. In a recent study, Kettler (2014) investigated if critical thinking skills differed between fourth-grade gifted students and their general education counterparts. Kettler's (2014) quantitative study indicated that gifted students "demonstrated advanced critical thinking skills compared with general education students" (p. 133) supporting the need for differentiation of these skills. Furthermore, these results suggest that strength in critical thinking skills is a need of gifted learners (Kettler, 2014).

While intellectual giftedness is related to increased ability to critically think, critical thinking skills rely on formal instruction (Linn & Shore, 2008; McCollister & Sayler, 2010). According to McCollister & Sayler (2010), academic growth is enhanced by integrating critical thinking skills into content instruction. Research (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Coleman & Cross, 2001; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Gentry et al., 2011; Kaplan, 2009; Kettler, 2010; Kettler, 2014;

Little, 2012; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; McCollister & Sayler, 2010; Mooij, 2008; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Tomlinson, 1994; 1995; 2003; 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 2005; 2011; 2012; Watters, 2010) indicates the need for educators to identify gifted learners' unmet needs and provide a learning experience that matches their abilities. McColllister & Sayler (2010) argue that gifted learners will "flourish in such an environment as they experience transfer, and internalize the deep thinking and complex content provided (p. 46). Infusion of critical thinking skills with required content knowledge opens a door to meet the challenges of gifted learners.

**Technology Enriched Instruction.**

The current global society was developed on a foundation of technology, and a generation was born into this new digital age. The digital generation sits in classrooms across the country with a strong desire to learn (Spires, Lee, Turner, & Johnson, 2008), but the education system is still in the pre-digital era. Integrating technology into instruction is vital. According to the Department of Education (2010), the challenge is to "leverage the learning sciences and modern technology to create engaging, relevant, and personalized learning experiences for all learners that mirror students' daily lives and the reality of their future" (p.10). Students of this digital, or millennial, generation are considered digital natives. Millennials are creating, learning, and communicating in new ways due to technology. Teachers can utilize technology to meet the learning needs of students (An & Reigeluth, 2011; Chen, Lambert, & Guirdy, 2010; Diemer, Fernandez, & Streepey, 2012; Fraga, Harmon, Wood, & Buckelew, 2011; Gadanidis, Hughes, &Cordy, 2011; Geist, 2011; Haydon, Hawkins, Denune, Kimener, McCoy, & Basham, 2012; Houssand & Houssand, 2008; Hsieh, Cho, Liu, Schallert, 2008; Hur & Oh, 2012; Keengwe, Pearson, & Smart, 2009; Kiger, Herro, & Prunty, 2012; Kingsley & Boone, 2008; O'Bannon,

Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011; Otta & Tavella, 2010; Spires, Lee, Turner, & Johnson, 2008; Watson & Watson, 2011). By capitalizing on the needs and interests of students, teachers offer a platform that allows their students to become active participants in learning.

All teachers want students to be successful in their classrooms. Currently, too many students sit in classrooms labeled as failures due to lack of growth or low achievement on standardized tests. If teachers could utilize mobile technology and use it to differentiate in the classroom, teachers and students would witness a significant increase in standardized test scores. Utilizing technology as a tool to meet the individual needs of students allows for greater differentiation while bridging the gap between how students live and learn as well as providing real world, hands-on experience (An & Reigeluth, 2011; Gadanidis, Hughes, & Cordy, 2011; Hur, & Oh, 2012; Keengwe, Pearson, & Smart, 2009; Kiger, Herro, & Prunty, 2012; O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011; Spires et al., 2008; van Hooft, 2008). In addition, ubiquitous access allows for learning and collaboration to extend beyond the walls of the classroom. Research examining the impact of m-learning, particularly among college students, provides evidence of student perceived learning and engagement (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Diemer, Fernandez, & Streepey, 2012; Geist, 2011; O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011). A study by An & Reigeluth (2011) highlights the link among technology, pedagogy, and content. Ideally, effective teachers integrate technological skills within a learner-centered environment in a their content area (An & Reigeluth, 2011; Gadanidis, Hughes, & Cordy, 2011). Technology enriched learning environments coupled with challenging curriculum enhances student engagement and motivation (An & Reigeluth, 2011; Diemer, Fernandez, & Streepey, 2012; Gadanidis, Hughes, &Cordy, 2011; Haydon, Hawkins, Denune, Kimener, McCoy, & Basham, 2012; Hur & Oh, 2012; Kiger, Herro, & Prunty, 2012;).

Students must be empowered in their learning through differentiation (McCollister &

Sayler, 2010; Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014;

Watters, 2010). With mobile devices, teachers can tailor content to learning needs. Using mobile

technology to customize learning, it becomes more meaningful for students and allows for

greater self-efficacy, which is essential in increasing student engagement (An & Reigeluth, 2011;

Chen et al., 2010; Diemer et al., 2012; Fraga et al., 2011; Gadanidis et al., 2011; Geist, 2011;

Haydon et al., 2012; Houssand & Houssand, 2008; Hsieh et al., 2008; Hur & Oh, 2012; Keengwe

et al., 2009; Kiger et al., 2012; Kingsley & Boone, 2008; O'Bannon et al., 2011; Otta & Tavella,

2010; Spires et al., 2008; Watson & Watson, 2011). Furthermore, Keengwe et al. (2009) suggest

appropriately integrated mobile technology enables students to acquire needed skills in a

"complex, highly technological knowledge-based economy" (p. 333).

Research supports the current argument that technology integration, particularly the use

of mobile devices for learning, has an impact on student engagement and achievement. Kiger et

al. (2012) investigated whether mobile learning intervention (MLI) influenced third grade math

achievement. Findings indicated students who received the MLI treatment outperformed the

control group on the post-intervention test. Kingsley & Boone (2008) examined the impact of

multimedia technology on 7$^{th}$ grade achievement in social studies classrooms. The quantitative

findings indicated statistically significant positive effects on achievement scores for the

treatment group. In addition, current K-12 research examines the role and impact of technology

among small populations with specific classifications such as ED and ELL. These studies

highlight the increase in student engagement when using iPads in a technology-enriched

environment (Fraga, Harmon, Wood, & Buckelew-Martin, 2011; Haydon, Hawkins, Denune,

Kimener, McCoy, & Basham, 2012; Hsieh, Cho, Liu, & Schallert, 2008).  Some researchers

(Geist, 2011; Haydon, Hawkins, Denune, Kimener, McCoy, & Basham, 2012; Houssand & Houssand, 2008) suggest engagement would increase among gifted students in a technology-enriched environment.

### Individual Pacing.

Gifted learners have differing learning abilities and need more than the traditional curriculum. Curriculum compacting and acceleration provide unique pacing for high-ability students.  Acceleration can take many forms—subject acceleration, in-class acceleration, grade-skipping, and early entry (Gallagher, Smith, & Merrotsy, 2011). Research (Gallagher et al., 2011; Kulik, 2004; Rogers, 2004) supports benefits to achievement for acceleration.

Curriculum compacting eliminates mastered curricular material and concepts and replaces it with more rigorous learning activities (Reis, Westberg, Kulikowich, & Purcel, 1998). In a national sample of 336 high ability students, Reis et al. (1998) examine the impact of curriculum compacting on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Close to half of the curricula was replaced with learning activities such as interdisciplinary units, independent study, projects, and alternative assessments. Results revealed the achievement test scores of students who receive a compacted curriculum did not differ from those who did not, which suggests curriculum compacting is not a hindrance to achievement (Reis et al., 1998).

### Independent Study.

Independent study has become a more common instructional strategy for gifted learners. A study in a middle school in Virginia examined the use of an Inventions Independent Study based on the Powers Plan. Researchers wanted to "analyze the connection between student choice, the use of independent study, and the connection of social studies with real-world experiences as motivating factors for student achievement" (Powers, 2008, p. 59). Research

findings supported the need for "voice and choice, challenge, and critical thinking for high ability students" (Powers, 2008, p. 63). Students take ownership of learning through topic selection, direction, and outcome of the product as well as the learning process. Teachers provide guidance and support through timely feedback. When students take ownership of their learning, engagement tends to increase leading to a motivation to achieve more as well as an increase in self-efficacy.

**Caring and Effective Teachers.**

Since the 1990s, researchers have examined the characteristics of teacher effectiveness (Babbage, 2002; Cotton, 1995; Davis & Rimm, 2004; Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Good & Brody, 1994; Leithwood, 1990; Patrick, Alderman, Ryan, Edelin, & Midgley, 2001; Patrick, Turner, Meyer, & Midgley, 2003; Robinson, 2008; Tomlinson, Little, Tomlinson, & Bower, 2000; Warren, Foy, & Dickerson, 2008; Wubbels, Levy, & Breckelmans, 1997). According to the Gentry et al. (2011), "keys to student motivation, learning, and engagement" (p. 112) include content knowledge (Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2000; Watters, 2010), enthusiasm (Babbage, 2002; Patrick et al., 2003; Robinson, 2008; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010), feedback (Patrick et al., 2001; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010), and supportive student/teacher relationships (Patrick et al., 2001; Robinson, 2008; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010).  In addition, research indicates that making connections (Gentry et al., 2011; Watters, 2010;), high expectations (Gentry et al., 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010), and passion (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whatlen, 1993; Gentry et al., 2011; Watters, 2010) are key components of effective teaching. While effective teaching practices are important for all students, it is critical in gifted education.

*Connections.*

In Watters'(2010) study, a theme that emerged was connection. According to Watters (2010), connection is the relationship building between teachers and students within a relevant content area in order to achieve a common goal. This connectedness is manifested in multiple ways. Teachers connecting and fostering positive relationships with students led to increased motivation for students (Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010). Many gifted students perceived a supportive environment when teachers demonstrated that they cared whether it was personalization of practice problems, use of humor, or attendance at sporting events (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, Choi, 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010). In addition, students cited the importance of teachers acknowledging student interests and "connecting pedagogical practices with those interests (Watters, 2010, p. 230). Another manifestation of connectedness included "messages to the student that suggested the teacher was a co-learner willing to engage with the student in achieving a common learning outcome" (Watters, 2010, p. 231). According to Gentry et al. (2011), exemplary teachers recognize the importance of connecting with students. In Gentry et al. (2011), teachers viewed their students as individuals first; therefore, these teachers continually tried different approaches to aid students in making connections to learning.

### *High Expectations.*

Education should enable all students to reach their potential cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally (Bruner, 1971; Mooij, 1999). All too often, teachers teach to the middle ability student with appropriate expectations. For the gifted learners, these expectations are already low due to a non-challenging curriculum (Kolb & Jussim, 1994; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Tomlinson, 1994) leading to lack of motivation (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Watters, 2010). When teachers effectively utilize differentiation, all students are held to high

academic expectations (Moon, 2005; Watters, 2010). In a qualitative study on exemplary

teachers, Gentry et al. (2011) discussed how the theme of high expectations manifested in

classrooms of different teachers. These teachers discussed the importance of challenging students

to constantly improve in order to achieve. Watters' (2010) qualitative study highlighted high

school gifted students views on teachers. The students were encouraged by teachers' high

expectations, which helped them to develop a sense of self-efficacy. For many gifted students,

high expectations forced students to expand beyond their comfort zone, thus allowing for

academic growth and achievement (Gentry et al., 2011; Vygotsky, 1978).

### *Knowledge.*

Teacher knowledge in content matter impacts performance level of students (Watters,

2010).  Gifted students acknowledged the importance of teachers' knowledge (Gentry,

Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010).

According to Arnove (2010), gifted educators need both content and pedagogical expertise to

effectively teach gifted students. For gifted students, interdisciplinary connections affected their

motivation (Siegle et al., 2014). According to Siegle et al., (2014), students desired to see content

learning connected to current events or individuals' stories. There is a clear expectation by gifted

students that teachers possess deep content knowledge as well as being well versed in multiple

disciplines and current events (Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010).

### *Passion.*

Witnessing commitment and passion for a cause can be inspiring for many. One simply

needs to look to the examples of Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, or Mother Teresa to

see the impact passion has for those who are witnesses.  For students, teachers who exhibited

passion and enthusiasm for the content often inspired and motivated these students to excel

(Babbage, 2002; Patrick, Turner, Meyer, & Midgley, 2003; Robinson, 2008; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010). Csikszentmihalyi's et al. (1993) research supports the connection between teachers' passion and positive student experiences. Results of Watters (2010) study indicate that gifted students' motivation increased when teachers were passionate and enthusiastic about the subject. Furthermore, students recalled negative reflections for teachers they perceived lacked passion (Watters, 2010).

   *Relevance.*

   In both Gentry et al. (2011) and Watters (2010), relevance was a theme that emerged in studies examining exemplary teaching. Gifted learners in both studies valued teachers' ability to make learning relevant to their lives (Gentry et al., 2011; Watters, 2010). For some, relevance was manifested when teachers connected learning to personal interests (Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014). For others, creating relevance in learning includes real world connections (Garn & Jolly, 2014; Gentry et al., 2011; Klimis & VanTassel-Baska, 2013; O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; van Hooft, 2008; Watters, 2010), interdisciplinary connections (Gentry et al., 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010), and long-term value (Garn & Jolly, 2014; Little, 2012; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Siegle et al., 2014; VanTassel-Baska, 2011). In addition, individualization of learning established needed relevance for gifted students (Gentry et al., 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010). Gifted students desire student-centered, individualized instruction that connects to their long-term interests (Bruner, 1971; Demos & Foshay, 2009; Garn & Jolly, 2014; Gentry et al., 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; Subban, 2006; Watters, 2010).

**Student Voice**

   Gifted students tend to become bored in classrooms and desire greater challenges in the

classroom. Some of the differentiation methods that researchers identified were CAPs, independent study, and menus which allowed for increased student input in learning (Caraisco, 2007; Garn & Jolly, 2014; Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Kanevsky, 2011; Powers, 2008; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010). Using Gardner's Multiple Intelligences as a guide, teachers can venture beyond traditional methods and generate different products that highlight an individual student's strengths and foster engagement. Performance tasks can take the form of a learning contract or a menu that allows students to become involved in their own learning.  Along with learning style, teachers can differentiate based on student interest and ability level. Benefits for differentiating instruction include "a sense of self-efficacy, increased content understanding, learner empowerment, increased academic achievement, and inclusion of each child in the learning process" (Scigliano and Hipsky, 2010, p.83). Powers (2008) recommends three practices "for a sound gifted education: (1) student choice and voice, (2) the use of independent study, and (3) connection to real-world experiences" (p.57).

Student Voice refers to the active involvement of students who are able to make decisions regarding potential areas of study, products produced, and collaborative efforts on their educational journey. Student choice and voice is an essential part of deferential differentiation. Teachers and students sharing responsibility for differentiation is "synergy for success that honors the talents and uniqueness of the individual while contributing to the whole" (Powers, 2008, p. 58). When students are able to voice what they want to learn, they take responsibility for their learning. Too often gifted students are bored due to a lack of challenge. The boredom solution is student choice (Garn & Jolly, 2014; Gentry et al., 2011; Powers, 2008; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010). Students will choose topics of interest to them. According to Powers (2008), interest "comes from a source of passion or motivation from within the student that is

self-directed and consuming for gifted individuals" (p. 58). In order for gifted students to develop learner autonomy, teachers must connect classroom standards and curriculum with a student's voice and choice.

Independent study as well as contract activity packages (CAPs) and menus provide students autonomy in their learning. The independent study allows both teachers and students to share responsibility of learning. Students take ownership of learning through topic selection, direction, and outcome of the product as well as the learning process. Teachers provide guidance and support through timely feedback. When students take ownership of their learning, engagement tends to increase leading to a motivation to achieve more (Caraisco, 2007; Gentry et al., 2011; Siegle et al., 20114; Watters, 2010). CAPs "enable motivated, independent, or nonconforming students to learn effectively, efficiently, and enjoyably" (Caraisco, 2007, p. 257). Recent studies for independent study and CAPs as well as AP and IB programs support differentiation strategies as effective tools for engaging gifted learners (Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Powers, 2008).

Results from qualitative studies on the use of independent study and AP/IB programs (Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Powers, 2008) offer educators insight into the possible methods to meet the needs of gifted learners. In a study involving student surveys following an independent study, 100% of the students stated having a choice in the topic was important and was a motivating factor in completing the project. In a study examining student opinions regarding AP/IB programs, most students enjoyed the challenge of AP and IB classes even though the workload was increased, and they preferred the AP and IB environment over general education classes. In addition, students indicated that the "one size fits all curriculum and instruction of AP and IB courses did not match the way they like to learn" (Hertberg-Davis &

Callahan, 2008, p. 205). A quantitative study examining the correlation of using CAPS and student engagement indicated there was a "statistically significant increase in positive attitude toward science learning" (Caraisco, 2007, p. 258) when using the CAPs lesson versus the traditional lesson. Teacher observations indicated that students were engaged during the CAP lesson while a sense of disengagement was apparent in the traditional lesson. The CAP lesson allowed students a choice in not only how they would learn the content, but also the method in which they would show their understanding of the content.  Overall, in each of these studies, students were empowered to take ownership of their own learning.

**Student Engagement and Self-Efficacy**

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy describes a student's belief in his or her own ability to accomplish a task. Hsieh et al. (2008) further suggest that students must also have an expectation of success. According to Siegle et al. (2014), gifted students valued learning in which self-efficacy developed.  This self-efficacy was reflected by student pride in their quality of work (Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014). Having teachers empower them in their learning increased their confidence in their abilities resulting in increased engagement and motivation (Siegle et al., 2014). Hsieh et al. (2008) examined self-efficacy of middle school students. Findings suggest that students developed greater self-efficacy following collaboration with peers and autonomous learning through exploration (Hsieh, Cho, Liu, & Schallert, 2008).

When examining studies by Hsieh, Cho, Liu, & Schallert, (2008) and Kanevsky, (2011), connections between self-efficacy among middle school students in technology-enriched environments and implementation of deferential differentiation become evident. Kanevsky (2011) argued the importance for educators to balance student choice of learning with non-preferred ways of learning, which will enable them to develop a wide range of learning

strategies. Collaboration is often a key component in technology-enriched classrooms. According to Hsieh, Cho, Liu, & Schallert, (2008), when collaboration, technology, and differentiation are combined, students perceived an increase in engagement, confidence, and self-efficacy.

**Summary**

Based on a review of literature, research indicates gifted learners have different characteristics and learning needs from the general student population (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Coleman & Cross, 2001; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Gentry et al., 2011; Kaplan, 2009; Kettler, 2010; Kettler, 2014; Little, 2012; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; McCollister & Sayler, 2010; Mooij, 2008; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Tomlinson, 1994; 1995; 2003; 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 2005; 2011; 2012; Watters, 2010). As such, it is vital for teachers and administrators to meet these needs in order to provide an equitable education to this population of learners (Gentry et al., 2011; Kaplan, 2009; Little, 2012; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Mooij, 2008; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Siegle et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 1994; 1995; 2003; 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 2005; 2011; 2012; Watters, 2010). A larger focus of the research is centered on gifted students in elementary (Gallagher, Smith, & Merrotsy, 2011; Kanevsky, 2011; Kettler, 2014; McCoach, Rambo, & Welsh, 2013; Mooij, 1999) or high school (Gentry et al., 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010; Zabloski, 2010; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012) with very little examining the gifted middle school student.

Current educational legislation and emphasis on high stakes testing has focused the educational lens on lower achieving students. In addition, the state-led Common Core State Standards Initiative has sought to increase rigor for general education students nationwide. In spite of current educational focus and reform, little attention is directed to gifted learners in the

classroom. Just as low achieving students need individualized instruction so do gifted learners (Bruner, 1971; Mooij, 2008; Tomlinson, 1995). Recent studies investigated the impact teachers have on the motivation and achievement of gifted learners (Garn & Jolly, 2014; Gentry et al., 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010). Self-efficacy among gifted students often leads to increased motivation and achievement (Caraisco, 2007; Gentry et al., 2011;Hsieh, Cho, Lui, & Shallert, 2008; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010).

Understanding gifted learners and their needs are important steps in the path to inspiring the uninspired (Bozhovich, 2009; Caraisco, 2007; Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, & Choi, 2011; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Karenevsky, 2011; Klimis and VanTassel-Baska, 2013; Kravtsova, 2009; Montgomery, 2009; Mooij, 2008; Powers, 2008; Siegle et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 1994; 1995; 2003; 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 2005; 2011; 2012; Watters, 2010; Zabloski, 2010; Zaretskii, 2009).  While researchers and educators debate why some gifted learners lack inspiration (Agne, 2001; Caraisco, 2007; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kanevsky, 2011; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Montgomery, 2009; Mooij, 1999; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996; Powers, 2008; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Siegle et al., 2014the gifted learner's voice must be heard. Gifted learners who lack inspiration can shed light on the phenomenon. By understanding the phenomenon, educators can begin adapting and changing curriculum and instruction in order to truly challenge and inspire all gifted learners. Qualitative phenomenology is a good methodology because the targeted gifted learners should provide a deeper understanding of why the phenomenon occurs.

# CHAPER THREE: METHODS

## Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve. As such, a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach was used to address four research questions: How do middle school gifted students describe the terms *inspired* and *motivation*? How do gifted middle school students, their parents, and their teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve? What factors do participants identify as influencing the lack of inspiration to achieve? What impact does the lack of inspiration to achieve have on gifted middle school students' academic experiences and achievements? This chapter describes the chosen research design and the rationale for its selection. A description of the researcher's role is included. Also provided is a discussion of the setting and participants. In addition, a description of the data collection, questionnaire, interview questions, and data analysis is included. The interview questions are grounded in literature and include an explanation of purpose for validation. Finally, the study's trustworthiness and ethical considerations is provided.

## Design

The researcher sought to understand how gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve. The goal of the researcher was to understand the essence of their shared experience. With this goal in mind, a transcendental phenomenological research design was used (Moustakas, 1994). In his approach to phenomenological research, Moustakas (1994) highlights three processes that facilitate knowledge: Epoche, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, and Imaginative Variation. Epoche required me to set aside previous understandings and judgments when examining the

phenomena. I bracketed out my own experiences involving teaching and gifted education by maintaining a reflective journal (see Appendix A). At this point, the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction process began. This allowed me to perceive the phenomena as if for the first time. This approach allowed me to gain a "textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). This approach was followed by the Imaginative Variation, which aims to "grasp the structural essences of experience" (p. 35). According to Moustakas (1994), "the structural essences of Imaginative Variation are then integrated with the textual essences of the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction in order to arrive at a textual-structural synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomenon" (p. 36). Several themes emerged and were used to develop the essence of the shared experience studied. Because this study sought only to understand how gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve, following Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology procedures for analysis was most appropriate.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guided this phenomenological study:

1. How do gifted middle school students describe the terms *inspired* and *motivation*?

2. How do gifted middle school students, their parents, and their teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve?

3. What factors do participants identify as influencing the lack of inspiration to achieve?

4. What impact does the lack of inspiration to achieve have on gifted middle school students' academic experiences and achievements?

**Setting**

Sunnydale School District (pseudonym), located in a suburban area of Northeast Georgia, has four middle schools in the district. Caucasian students comprised 79% of the district population while Hispanic and African-American students represented 10% and 7% respectively while Asian and Multi-Racial students represented 2% each. Sunnydale's middle school gifted population comprised 77% Caucasian, 9% Hispanic, 6% African-American, 4% Asian, and 4% Multi-racial, which was fairly representative of the overall student population. Furthermore, the gender breakdown of gifted students was close to equal with 53% females and 46% males. Sunnydale School District primarily served working class families with an economically disadvantaged population of 71%. The middle schools were chosen due to research accessibility to the needed population for this study. Only two of the district's four middle schools were used due to researcher and committee member associations at the two middle schools not used. Interviews took place either in the participant's home, the participant's school, or a public location of the participant's choosing.

**Participants**

Participants for this study included gifted middle school students who were between the ages of 12 and 14. I was able to find participants who represented each age, but only seventh and eighth grade students were represented. Parents and teachers of the identified students were included as participants in order to add additional voices to the study. Upon completion of my data collection, I realized this group of students was very open and eager to share their experiences because they wanted their voices to be heard. The targeted total sample size was 10-15 participants, or until data saturation was reached. For this study, the participant sample included seven student participants, seven parent participants, and five faculty participants.

Because this study focused how gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve; a purposeful sample was used in this study. The criterion for this purposeful sample was gifted middle school students who were or had been on gifted academic probation.  According to the state of Georgia, a local board of education must have a continuation policy for students receiving gifted services. Gifted students must maintain satisfactory performance in order to maintain eligibility. Failure to maintain satisfactory performance results in a probationary period in which students continue to receive services while trying to achieve satisfactory performance status (Georgia Department of Education, 2014). In Sunnydale School District, gifted students must earn an 80 or higher to maintain satisfactory performance status. Since gifted teachers are required to complete probation paperwork every 9 weeks, I used this documentation in order to identify appropriate participants.  Once student participants were identified, a letter explaining the study and consent form was sent to the parents. Teacher participants were based on student participants' current and former teachers. Parent participants were also based on student participants.

Participants were treated as three groups: student participant group, parent participant group, and teacher participant group. The total sample size was 17. The sample size of the student participant group for this study was seven students, or until data saturation was attained, which is recommended by Creswell (2010).  Student participants included male and female students ages 12-14. While I had hoped the sample would include Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic students in order to represent the middle school gifted demographics in the district, there were only Caucasian students and one Asian student who met the criterion and agreed to participate. Even though the mother of the one Asian student agreed to be interviewed, phone calls to schedule an interview were never returned.   Each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

| Name | Age | Student/Parent/ Teacher | Gender | Race/Ethnicity | Level of Education |
|------|-----|-------------------------|--------|----------------|--------------------|
| Andrew | 13 | Student | Male | Caucasian | 8th grade |
| Brittany | 12 | Student | Female | Caucasian | 7th grade |
| Chris | 12 | Student | Male | Caucasian | 7th grade |
| David | 14 | Student | Male | Caucasian | 8th grade |
| Eric | 13 | Student | Male | Caucasian | 7th grade |
| Finley | 14 | Student | Female | Caucasian | 8th grade |
| Gabbie | 13 | Student | Female | Caucasian | 8th grade |
| Mrs. Allen | 40 | Parent | Female | Caucasian | Master's Degree |
| Mrs. Barrett | 40 | Parent | Female | Caucasian | Juris Doctor |
| Mr. Campbell | 38 | Parent | Male | Caucasian | Bachelor's Degree |
| Mrs. Davis | 38 | Parent | Female | Caucasian | Master's Degree |
| Mrs. Edwards | 37 | Parent | Female | Caucasian | Bachelor's Degree |
| Mrs. Fuller | 45 | Parent | Female | Caucasian | Bachelor's Degree |
| Mrs. Greer | 50 | Parent | Female | Caucasian | Bachelor's Degree |
| Mrs. Howard | 35 | Teacher | Female | Caucasian | Bachelor's Degree |
| Mrs. Jones | 55 | Teacher | Female | Caucasian | Master's Degree |
| Mrs. King | 36 | Teacher | Female | Caucasian | Bachelor's Degree |
| Mr. Lewis | 40 | Teacher | Male | Caucasian | Bachelor's Degree |
| Mr. Martin | 36 | Teacher | Male | Caucasian | Master's Degree |

**Procedures**

Liberty's Institutional Review Board first approved the study. Following IRB approval (see Appendix B), the school district's superintendent granted permission for the researcher to conduct the study (see Appendix C). After district approval was granted, participants were selected based on gifted probation documentation. A letter explaining the study (see Appendix D) along with a student consent form (see Appendix E) was sent to the parents of identified participants.  In addition, parent informed consent (see Appendix F) and faculty informed consent (see Appendix G) was obtained from any faculty and parent who were interviewed. As consent forms were obtained, data was collected through individual student interviews, faculty interviews, parent interviews, and student questionnaires.

Each interview was audio recorded. During interviews, I kept field notes to note facial expressions and body language (Zabloski, 2010). In addition, a reflective journal (see Appendix A) allowed me to bracket, or set aside any prejudgments. Following each interview, I would journal my thoughts regarding the interview. Each interview was then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Recordings, questionnaires, and all transcribed interviews are securely locked in a safe in my home office. Upon completion of data collection, data was analyzed in order to identify the emergent themes.

## The Researcher's Role

As a mother of a fifth grade son who is gifted, I witnessed his excitement for learning on a daily basis. He is a sponge who soaks up new information and is always eager to learn more. As a parent and teacher, I wanted this eagerness to learn to extend throughout the span of his educational career. This personal connection inspired a passion to understand this eagerness and motivation, or lack thereof, in the gifted students I teach. If I could understand why students are excited to learn, or why they lost interest in learning, then I could change and grow as an educator in order to meet the needs of these students.

As an eighth grade teacher of gifted students, I see students who are bored and are going through the motions. What happens to these gifted students between early elementary, when learning and achievement is exciting, and middle school, when learning and achievement no longer matters? While many educators can theorize why this happens, I sought to provide an avenue for middle school students' voices to help understand this all too important question.

Due to the biases I have as mother of a gifted child and a teacher of gifted students, it was essential for me to maintain a reflective journal (see Appendix A) throughout the study and bracket out my bias. By writing down my assumptions, it really helped me to set aside my biases.

I do believe this enabled me to view the data with fresh eyes and truly engage the data without my assumptions dictating my findings. For example, I believed that gifted middle school students who were uninspired to achieve lacked parental support. My assumptions were that involved and supportive parents led to inspired and motivated students. Likewise, very little parental involvement and support led to underachieving and uninspired students. Even though my assumptions were based on professional experience, it did not always align with the data. Hearing the stories of the seven middle school students as they described their educational experience did corroborate some of my assumptions; however, all seven student participants had very supportive and involved parents.

Moustakas (1994) states, "The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions" (p. 114). Due to this being a phenomenological study, I interviewed participants with open-ended questions, and interviews were also semi-structured. For the most part, I was able to listen to the participants tell their stories as they described their experiences. Occasionally, I provided clarification or asked prompting questions to guide the participant into a deeper discussion of topic as needed.

**Data Collection**

Triangulating data requires researchers to use multiple sources of data in order to "provide corroborating evidence" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). According to Creswell (2013), researchers who use multiple sources of data "are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings" (p. 251). It is imperative that researchers triangulate data collection methods, since it increases "the probability that findings and interpretations will be found credible" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305). As such, I collected data from three different sources—student questionnaire, interviews, and member checking. The adult participants read

the transcripts of their interview to verify its accuracy. This helped to triangulate the data, and thus increase trustworthiness of the results, which helped to make the research more credible.

Each interview was recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. During the interview, I took field notes and later wrote my thoughts and assumptions in my reflective journal in order to begin the bracketing process.

**Questionnaire**

The first data collection method was a questionnaire that enabled participants to expound on topics related to their educational experience, as seen in Table 2 below.  In order to address how middle school gifted students defined the terms "inspired" and "motivation," the questionnaire included questions one through eight in Table 2. These prompts allowed the student participant to not only define these two terms, but also provide examples, which helped to shape their narrative. Question nine in Table 2 allowed each participant to describe the ideal environment that was conducive to his or her learning. The purpose of questions 10 and 11 in Table 2 was to provide a comparison and contrast of participants' educational experience in elementary versus middle school. An educational panel examined the questions for this questionnaire for content and face validity. Following IRB approval, the questions were piloted with a gifted student who was not a participant in the study in order to address any confusion with the questions.

Once parents consented to the interviews, each student participant received the questionnaire as Microsoft Word document via their parent's email. Completed questionnaires were saved to an external hard drive for three years as required by federal law. Prior to the interview, I reviewed student responses to the questionnaire. This allowed me to address any questions or prompt the student to further explain any responses during the interview.

Table 2

*Student Questionnaire*

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1. What motivates you to do well in school?

2. What motivates you outside of school?

3. How would you define the term motivation?

4. What are different ways you are motivated to achieve?

5. Who is a role model in your life/who do you consider a role model?

6. What makes this person a role model?

7. How would you define the term "inspired"?

8. How can these qualities impact you as a student?

9. In what type of classroom environment do you thrive as a student?

10. How has your experience in middle school been similar to your experience in elementary school?

11. How has your experience in middle school been different from your experience in elementary school?

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**Student Interviews**

In order to gain an understanding of how middle school gifted students described their academic experiences and achievements as well as the factors or experiences affecting or influencing their lack of inspiration to achieve, student participants were interviewed using open-

ended questions, as seen in Table 3 below. I interviewed student participants individually with a proctor present at a location chosen by the student's parent.

Each interview began with a conversation to help create a relaxed and comfortable environment (Moustakas, 1994). In order to further facilitate a relaxed environment, I also shared information about myself that was not related to the study. During the interviews, I took field notes, and the interviews were recorded via audio and later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Field notes and transcriptions were locked in my home office safe.

From the answers to the interview questions, I gained a better understanding for why some middle school gifted students are uninspired to achieve. According to Moustakas (1994), "Broad questions may facilitate the obtaining of rich, vital, substantive descriptions of the [participants] experience of the phenomenon" (p. 116). Questions one through nine were adapted from a dissertation published by Liberty University (Zabloski, 2010). Questions were reviewed by an expert panel to ensure adherence to the purpose of the study. Following IRB approval, the interview questions were piloted with a gifted student, who was not a participant, for clarification purposes.

Table 3

*Student Open-Ended Interview Questions*

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Questions

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1. Tell me about yourself. (Prompts: family background, relationships, friendships, likes and dislikes, current situation)

2. Tell me about your educational experience. (Prompts: elementary, middle; most and least

favorite teachers in those grades; programs or extra-curricular involvement, awards)

3. When did you first enter the gifted program?

4. What is school like for you?

5. What is important to you as a student?

6. Did you ever feel pressure/different because you were gifted? Explain.

7. How does your family and peers affect your school performance?

8. Do you feel your culture has an impact on your school performance?

9. In your view, what specific teaching strategies have had a positive impact on your learning?

10. Tell me how you feel about learning.

11. Tell me about your experiences in elementary school.

12. Tell me about your experiences in middle school.

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The purpose of question one in Table 3 served as an opener to the interview, which allowed the participant to feel comfortable. Moustakas (1994) suggested phenomenological interviews begin with a conversation "aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere" (p. 114). The aim of phenomenology is "to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Questions two through eight sought to understand the participants' experiences, which is the aim of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Question two in Table 3 was asked to better understand the educational experiences the participants had experienced.  The purpose of question three in Table 3 was asked in order to analyze any changes in the participants' educational experience surrounding gifted identification process. Questions four and five in

Table 3 provided student voice to current educational experiences and desired, non-negotiable components needed in his or her school experience. The purpose of question six in Table 3 was to ascertain the impact a gifted label had on the participants' academic achievement. Question seven and eight in Table 3 addressed any factors or influences, outside of the participant, that may have impacted middle school gifted students' desire to achieve. According to Bruner (1971), learning is individual since students have different abilities and their ability to process information as well as internalize it is different.  Within this framework, questions nine and 10 in Table 3 allowed participants to describe their thoughts on the learning process as well as what has and has not been successful for them. The purpose of questions 11 and 12 in Table 3 provided a comparison and contrast of participants' educational experience in elementary versus middle school.

**Faculty Interviews**

In order to gain an understanding of how teachers described the academic experiences and achievements of middle school gifted students as well as the factors or experiences affecting or influencing middle school gifted students' lack of inspiration to achieve, faculty participants were interviewed using open-ended questions, as seen in Table 4 below. Questions were reviewed by an expert panel to ensure adherence to the purpose of the study. Following IRB approval, the interview questions were piloted with a middle school teacher, who was not a participant, for clarification purposes.

Just like with student interviews, each faculty interview began with a conversation to help create a relaxed and comfortable environment (Moustakas, 1994). In order to further facilitate a relaxed environment, I also shared information about myself that was not related to the study. Faculty participants were interviewed individually by me at the participants' school. During the

interviews, I took field notes, and the interviews were recorded via audio and later transcribed by

a professional transcriptionist. Field notes and transcriptions were locked in my home office safe.

Table 4

*Faculty Open-Ended Interview Questions*

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Questions

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1. Tell me about yourself. (Prompts: family background, relationships, friendships, locations, likes and dislikes, current situation)

2. Describe your classroom environment.

3. Describe your approach student instruction.

4. How do you differentiate for gifted learners in your classroom?

5. How do you assess gifted learners in your classroom?

6. Tell me about a specific gifted student who has been on and off probation. What factors impact him/her moving on and off gifted probation?

7. What differences do you see between motivated and inspired gifted students and those who are not?

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The purpose of question one in Table 4  served as an opener to the interview allowing the

participant to feel comfortable (Moustakas, 1994). Since "evidence from phenomenological

research is derived from first-person reports of life experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84), it was

necessary for faculty participants to share experiences about their own classrooms. Questions

two through seven were framed based on the aim of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994).

Questions two and three in Table 4 were asked to better understand the educational experiences the participants' students may experience as well as shed light on the participants' educational philosophy. The purpose of questions four and five in Table 4 addressed how each faculty participant implements different differentiation and assessment strategies. Questions six and seven in Table 4 allowed participants to provide their own insight into the proposed problem.

**Parent Interviews**

In order to gain an understanding of how parents described the academic experiences and achievements of middle school gifted students as well as the factors or experiences affecting or influencing middle school gifted students' lack of inspiration to achieve, parent participants were interviewed using open-ended questions, as seen in Table 5 below. Questions were reviewed by an expert panel to ensure adherence to the purpose of the study. Following IRB approval, the interview questions

Just like with student and faculty interviews, each parent interview began with a conversation to help create a relaxed and comfortable environment (Moustakas, 1994). In order to further facilitate a relaxed environment, I also shared information about myself that was not related to the study. Parent participants were interviewed individually by me at location of the participant's choosing. During the interviews, I took field notes, and the interviews were recorded via audio and later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Field notes and transcriptions were locked in my home office safe.

Table 5

*Parent Open-Ended Interview Questions*

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Questions

1. Tell me about yourself. (Prompts: family background, relationships, friendships, locations, likes and dislikes, current situation)

2. Describe how your child is at home.

3. Describe your child's academic experiences in elementary school.

4. Describe your child's academic experience in middle school.

5. How has your child's experience changed from elementary to middle school?

6. Tell me about a your child who has been on and off probation. What factors impact him/her moving on and off gifted probation?

7. What differences do you see between when your child has been motivated and inspired and when he/she is not?

The purpose of question one in Table 5 served as an opener to the interview allowing the participant to feel comfortable (Moustakas, 1994). Regarding phenomenological principles Moustakas (1994) stated, "scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meanings and essences of experience" (p. 84). As such, questions two through seven sought to allow parent participants the opportunity to describe, from their perspective, the experiences of their child. Question two in Table 5 was asked to better understand the student outside of the school setting. The purpose of questions three and four in Table 5 was asked to better understand the educational experiences the participants' child may have experienced. Questions five in Table 5 provided a comparison and contrast of the participants' educational experience in elementary versus middle school. Questions six and seven in Table 5 allowed participants to provide their own insight into the proposed problem.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis procedures followed the guidelines of transcendental phenomenology, which includes the Epoche, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, Imaginative Variation, and Synthesis  (Moustakas, 1994). The Epoche is "the process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Phenomenological Reduction includes the process of horizonalization and the construction "a complete textual description of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96). Imaginative Variation "enables the researcher to derive structural themes from the textual descriptions that have been obtained through Phenomenological Reduction (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). Finally, the synthesis of both the textural and structural descriptions leads to a composite description of the essence of participants' experience. For this study, I followed these steps as I analyzed the collected data.

**Epoche**

The first step of data analysis required me to bracket, or set aside any preconceived judgments or beliefs. According to Moustakas (1994), this important step is the Epoche in which the "everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego" (p. 33). Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) says it is "the opportunity for a fresh start, a new beginning, not being hampered by the voices of the past that tell us the way things are or voices of the present that direct our thinking" (p. 85). In order to alleviate as much bias as possible, I attempted to bracket my personal opinions and beliefs related to gifted students and gifted education. This was done using a reflective journal (see Appendix F).

 **Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction**

The next step in Moustakas' (1994) method of data analysis is Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, in which I compiled a textural description of the data. Upon viewing the transcribed interviews, I began pre-coding by "circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, or coloring rich or significant participant quotes or passages that [struck me]" (Saldana, 2013, p. 19). Saldana (2013) suggests In Vivo coding in studies involving youth. According to Saldana (2013), "The child and adolescent voices are often marginalized, and coding with their actual words enhances and deepens an adult's understanding of their cultures and worldviews" (p. 91). Since my study centered on hearing the voice of the middle school student, I utilized In Vivo coding in order to "prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Saldana, 2013, p. 91).

In order to achieve the textural description, I began by horizonalizing the data and "regarding every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and questions as having equal value" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). This enabled me to begin organizing these ideas and categories into significant statements. This step is vital in organizing the data for coding and interpreting the data. Using the data transcripts, I listed the non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements because these are "the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). Next, the invariant horizons were clustered into themes. I then synthesized invariant horizons and themes into a textual description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

**Imaginative Variation**

Once I had obtained a textual description of the data, I implemented Moustakas' (1994) next step, Imaginative Variation. In this step of data analysis, the goal is to compile the structural essences of the experience. According to Moustakas (1994), structural descriptions of an experience "is the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being

experienced; in other words the "how" that speaks to conditions that illuminate the "what" of experience" (p. 98). Ultimately, Imaginative Variation "enables the researcher to derive structural themes from the textual descriptions that have been obtained through Phenomenological Reduction (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). Once I gathered a structural description of the data, I grouped the structural descriptions into themes.

**Themes**

DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) stated, "A theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole" (p. 362). After I developed a structural description of the data, I examined the data and identified similarities from the significant statements. This allowed me to identify themes. Once themes emerged, I examined the transcripts once again in order to "elaborate on the themes through rich written description" (Saldana, 2013, p. 176). This enabled be to identify the themes and sub-themes.

**Textural and Structural Descriptions**

Following the identification of the themes, I began the last stage of analysis in Moustakas' (1994) process. Moustakas' (1994) final step is the integration of the structural essences with the textual essences in order to "arrive at a textual-structural synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomenon or experience being investigated" (p. 36). The synthesis of both textual and structural descriptions from each data source—questionnaire, student interviews, and teacher interviews—enabled me to synthesize findings into a "universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). Using quotes was essential for allowing participants' voices to be heard. This was their story. I only served to find the commonality in their stories.

**The Essence**

Finally I developed a composite description of the essence of the phenomenon. According to Moustakas (1994), essence refers to "that which is common or universal" among participants' experiences (p. 100). Essential to the composite essence is the "integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). The essence identified what participants shared regarding the experiences of gifted middle school students and factors that affect those experiences.

<div align="center">**Trustworthiness**</div>

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest trustworthiness is established when the participants' descriptions are reflected in the findings. Credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability are identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as the needed elements for establishing trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is the result of rigorous research with established procedures (Lietz. Langer, & Furman, 2006). In order to increase trustworthiness of the findings, I adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) identified elements.

**Credibility**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility refers to the accuracy of the reality being described. In order to establish credibility, I triangulated the data and utilized member checks and peer review. Triangulating data requires researchers to use multiple sources of data in order to "provide corroborating evidence" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). According to Creswell (2013), researchers who use multiple sources of data "are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings" (p. 251). As such, using four different sources—student questionnaire, student interviews, parent interviews, and faculty interviews—helped to make my research more credible.

Member checks were another method to credibility. I offered participants the opportunity to read the transcript of their interview. The adult participants verified the accuracy of their transcripts. In addition, by allowing the adult participants to review the data analysis and interpretation of the data, credibility of findings was established (Creswell, 2013). Of the 12 adult participants, four participants reviewed the findings. This strategy established credibility by allowing participants to review accuracy of findings thereby reducing threat of bias (Lietz. Langer, & Furman, 2006).

Peer reviews were used to further establish credibility. Peer review keeps a researcher honest by asking the tough questions about data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). By allowing colleagues to review the data analysis, the effects of reactivity and bias could be reduced (Lietz. Langer, & Furman, 2006). My dissertation committee and a fellow educator provided peer review and feedback.

**Dependability**

Similar to reliability, dependability "is concerned with the stability of the data" (Guba, 1981, p. 86). Triangulation of data no only established credibility, but also served to establish dependability. The student questionnaire, student interviews, parent interviews, and faculty interviews served to triangulate the data. To further address dependability, the data collection procedures and data analysis were addressed in detail in order to allow for replication of the study (Shelton, 2004).

**Transferability**

According to Guba (1981), it is not possible to established generalized truth statements. Instead, researchers must "be content with statements descriptive or interpretive of a given context" (Guba. 1981, p. 86). One way to ensure this transferability is through purposive

sampling. Since I sought a very specific population, my sample was purposive. Another way to ensure transferability, according to Guba (1981) is by "collecting thick descriptive data that will permit comparison of this context to other possible contexts" (p. 86). I did this by providing specific details regarding my procedures as well as including quotes from the participants' questionnaires and interviews.

**Confirmability**

According to Shenton (2004), "The concept of confirmability is the qualitative investigator's comparable concern to objectivity" (p. 72). Researchers must take steps to ensure that "the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher" (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). Triangulation of data helps to establish confirmability and reduce researcher bias. Furthermore, it was important that I clarified bias through bracketing. According to Tufford and Newman (2010), bracketing is used to limit "the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to research" (p. 81). In addition, bracketing "facilitates the researcher reaching deeper levels of reflection across all stages of qualitative research" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 81). In this study, I bracketed using a reflexive journal. In addition, I wrote memos during the data collection and analysis in order to reflect on my engagement with the data (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Finally, to ensure the findings produced are researcher-free (Guba, 1981), I provided numerous participant quotes in order to achieve confirmability.

## Ethical Considerations

There were several ethical considerations that were addressed in this study. Since the study focuses on middle school students, it was imperative to obtain approval from the IRB, district, and school of the students. Equally important to this approval was the consent of the

parent or guardian as well as the consent of the student. I needed to ensure anonymity of the

participants by providing pseudonyms. Confidentiality was also important. Confidentiality was

ensured through use of pseudonyms, and all data was kept on an external hard drive that was

locked in a safe when not being used by me. In addition, all audio recordings will be destroyed

after three years.

## Summary

Chapter Three has examined the research methods taken as I sought to understand how

gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to

achieve. I reviewed my four research questions as well as included a description of my setting,

participants, and procedures for conducting this transcendental phenomenological study. My

research plan included an examination of each portion of the research. In addition, a description

of the development of the questionnaire and interview questions was included. Finally, I

included a description of my data analysis procedures as well as the necessary steps to ensure

trustworthiness.

# CHAPTER FOUR:  FINDINGS

## Overview

This chapter presents a description of the participants and the results of this transcendental phenomenological study. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research aims to

> Determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience. (p. 13)

As such, the transcendental phenomenological approach was used to capture the essence of the phenomena under study – middle school students' lack of inspiration to achieve. In this chapter I weaved together the voices of the participants into a story that conveys the findings of this study.

The participants will be introduced by providing a description of each of the participants. For the student participants, the description will also include how each one defines the terms motivation and inspired. This portion directly answers the first research question: how do middle school gifted students describe the terms *inspired* and *motivation*?

## Participants

Seven gifted middle school students, one of their parents, and their SCOPE teacher participated in this study. Each participant was a middle school student enrolled in the gifted program (SCOPE) in the Sunnydale School District in northeast Georgia.  After receiving an informed consent (Appendix B, C, & D) from each participant, I met the participants

individually at the location of their choosing. For confidentiality purposes, a pseudonym was used.

**Student and Parent Participants**

**Andrew Allen.**

Andrew is a Caucasian male, who is 13 years old and in eighth grade. He has been in the gifted program since second grade. He loves all sports, but basketball is his favorite. He has a younger brother, and his parents are still married. It is evident from his questionnaire that his dad plays an important role in shaping his character. He identifies his dad as his role model. He reflected, "My dad is my role model. He understands me, like he went through the same things that I've gone through, like middle school and friendships." He further noted, "He can guide me with spiritual stuff. He'll help me to keep growing in my faith. When I am doing sports or mowing the yard, he will always try to help me."

Mrs. Allen, Andrew's mother, describes him as less outgoing than his younger brother. Andrew is more outgoing at school than his parents would have expected, however, he does need alone time and more down time once he arrives home from school. Mrs. Allen noted that Andrew is very respectful at school, but it is difficult to continue the good behavior at home. She mentioned, "We are trying to allow him some independence yet teach him to be respectful and to obey even if he doesn't understand the reasoning of why he is asked to do something." Mrs. Allen continued, "He always wants to know the why so we are trying to explain, but our reasons do not always make sense to him." She described Andrew as a very analytical thinker. This often leads to argumentative behavior with his parents.

Andrew defined motivation as "the drive or the strong wanting to be able to do something." He is motivated to achieve things "when people in sports are better than [him] at

something." He noted, "I am motivated to do as good as they did or better than them." He further reflected, "At school, if I get a lower grade, then I'll be motivated to understand what I did wrong." He also stated, "I don't want to dig ditches so that is part of what motivates me to do well." Andrew's definition of inspiration was the example of success provided by his father.

**Brittany Barrett.**

Brittany is a Caucasian female, who is 12 years old and in seventh grade. She has been in the gifted program since first grade. She has one older sister, and her parents are still married. She has a younger sister who was born with a heart defect. In spite of a heart transplant, her sister died at age three. Brittany loves to read and write. She credits her parents with her love for reading.

Mrs. Barrett, Brittany's mother, describes her as "creative, self-motivated, and moody. She struggles with balancing her emotions as she feels everything very intensely." Brittany loves to create art and has an eye for home decoration and fashion. Mrs. Barrett shared, "Brittany even decorated her own room on a budget, and she has taken great pride in that fact." She enjoys trapeze, silks, and acrobatics.

When prompted to define motivation, Brittany stated, "Motivation is the reason you do something. Like my motivation for learning is this, and that's the reason I want to learn…it pushes you to do something." Brittany was very detailed in defining the term inspired. "Inspired. I think it's when something gives you an idea, or the base of an idea. A vision or something that starts a vision." She further explained, "I was inspired to be an architect because I watched a lot of HGTV over the summer. I saw what I could do. To me, inspiration leads to motivation." Brittany also acknowledged her mother as a source of inspiration: "I look up to my mom because she was an exceptional student. I can do it because she did it."

**Chris Campbell.**

Chris is a Caucasian male, who is 12 years old and in seventh grade. He has been in the gifted program since first grade. He has an older brother and older sister, and his parents are still married. He loves soccer and plays year-round on a soccer travel team. His dad serves as one of the coaches on his travel soccer team. Chris's parents require his schoolwork to come first. His homework and projects must be completed before soccer practice. He admits, "If my grades drop tremendously, then I can't play in a game."

Chris's dad, Mr. Campbell, describes Chris as the "wittiest of the three kids." According to Mr. Campbell, Chris is "very bright, but not extremely motivated with school work. When he applies himself, he can achieve straight A's. The trick is getting him to apply himself. He tends to procrastinate whenever possible." As the youngest sibling, he often faces the academic pressure of his older sister's high-achieving reputation.  Mr. Campbell noted, "Chris makes friends easily, but would rather play X-Box than crack a book or study in his free time."

When prompted to define motivation, Chris stated, "Motivation is something that gives you the drive to want to achieve something or want to accomplish something. Going further, Chris identified factors that motivated him, "Teachers and peers motivates me…expectations motivate me…competing with SCOPE kids and my family is motivating." Chris was also detailed in defining the word inspired. "Seeing something or seeing someone else do something that makes you want to drive and makes you want to do whatever it takes to accomplish your goal." He continues,

> Being inspired can definitely make you want to go to school like ready to learn
> and probably make school more enjoyable you know. Just instead of going through the
> motions everyday and you're just there because you have to be there, but instead you're

there because you're thriving for knowledge, you want to learn. You're inspired to be better, smarter than you were yesterday.

**David Davis.**

David is a Caucasian male, who is 14 years old and finished his eighth grade year this past spring. He has been in the gifted program since third grade. His parents are divorced, and he lives primarily with his dad and stepmom. He has one older sister and two younger brothers. He enjoys working with his dad in construction.

Mrs. Davis, David's stepmom, describes him as quiet. She noted, "he spends a lot of his time in his bedroom." David is happiest when he is outside working with his dad. Mr. Davis owns a crane business. According to Mrs. Davis, "If it were up to David, he would spend every Saturday and Sunday, every school break, and all summer working with his daddy."

When prompted to define motivation, David defined motivation as "something that makes you better, or what you do in life." David also shared, "Being able to do things outside of school motivates me." He also indicated his father as a source of inspiration. "My dad is my role model. He works hard. We are a lot alike, and I know I can be successful because he is."

**Eric Edwards.**

Eric is a Caucasian male, who is 13 years old and in eighth grade. He entered the gifted program in fifth grade. He attended school near the coast of Georgia until he started middle school. His family moved to the Sunnydale school district at the beginning of his middle school year. His parents are divorced. Eric lives with his mother, his older brother, and two younger brothers during the week and with his dad on the weekends. He is into gaming, particularly Minecraft. He will often spend time creating things on Minecraft. He loves to draw and is an avid reader.

Eric is often the "go-between peace maker, trying to keep things and everybody together." Mrs. Edwards, Eric's mother, noted, "He is the one that I can depend on if I need something done, it will get done." When his mother is not feeling well, Eric "makes sure that everybody mellows down." Eric is close with his three brothers. All four boys share a room by choice.

When prompted to define motivation, Eric simply stated, "Motivation is why you do what you do." He also noted, "I pursue things that interest me." This was personal pursuit of knowledge was encouraged by his mother. He mentioned, "My mom has always encouraged me to find something that I am interested in and learn more about it." Eric acknowledges his mother as an important role model. "My mom is my role model. She has a dream of being a teacher, and she is working hard in college. If she can do it, then I can do it, too."

**Finley Fuller.**

Finley is a Caucasian female, who is 14 years old and finished her eighth grade year this past spring. She has been in the gifted program since second grade. She lives with her sister and parents, and she visits her grandparents often. She loves participating in chorus. From fourth through seventh grade, she has dealt with being bullied by other students. While under the care of a therapist, Finley confessed to cutting. It was during this difficult time that Finley was diagnosed with depression and autism.

Mrs. Fuller, Finley's mom, describes her as "not outgoing and tends to keep to herself." During elementary school, according to Mrs. Fuller, "Finley was a go getter. She mentored young children. She always wanted to please and help others." Due to the bullying she received in sixth and seventh grade, Finley became a recluse and truly struggled in school.

When prompted to define motivation, Finley shared, "motivation is why you do something well. It can also be someone that picks you up and wants you to do well." Finley notes the important role her mother and grandmother play in her inspiration. "My mom and grandmother are my role models. They inspire me because they went to college." She also mentioned the incentive her grandparents offer each year. "My grandparents have this deal with the grandkids that if you get straight A's or if you get an A average, you can go on whatever trip you want. Last year, I got straight A's, and I got to go to the Mediterranean with them."

**Gabbie Greer.**

Gabbie is a Caucasian female, who is 13 years old and in eighth grade. She entered the gifted program in first grade. She has a brother who is 18 months younger.

Mrs. Greer, Gabbie's mother, describes Gabbie as a "typical 13 year old girl who is somewhat disorganized and sloppy with her own space. She is struggling with being awkward, extremely thin, and very tall for her age." She does not like sports, but prefers reading and listening to music, playing the clarinet, and spending time with her friends. She and her brother have a close relationship. According to Mrs. Greer, Gabbie "has a silly sense of humor, but she can be extremely sensitive to constructive criticism."

When prompted to define motivation, Gabbie shared, "Motivation is why you do something. It spurs you on." She acknowledged the important role her parents play in her success. She stated, "My parents are my role models. I love science, and my dad is an engineer. Both my mom and dad always are there to support me and encourage me to be great."

**Mrs. Allen.**

Mrs. Allen is Andrew's mother. She has another son in elementary school. She has been married to Mr. Allen for 18 years. Both Mr. and Mrs. Allen have college degrees. Mrs. Allen has

a master's degree in social work. Mr. Allen is self-employed. Mrs. Allen has worked full-time as a social worker, but has reduced her hours in order to be more involved with her family. In her job as a social worker, she has aided in private adoptions by providing home studies. Most recently, she works with families with a loved one in hospice care. Because of this work, she has been a part of a multi-county grief coalition, which provides grief support to individuals and families.  As a family, the Allens enjoy sports and camping. Mrs. Allen acknowledges the importance of relationships and faith. She notes, "We value relationships with family and friends along with instilling a love for God, attending church activities, and serving the community."

**Mrs. Barrett.**

Mrs. Barrett is Brittany's mother. She has one older daughter who is in eighth grade. She had a younger daughter who had a heart transplant at four months old and later died at the age of three. She and Mr. Granger have been married for 18 years. Mrs. Barrett is an attorney with a contract with the Attorney General's office. Mr. Granger works for the nearby university. Mrs. Barrett describes her family, "We don't have cable, we recycle and compost, we make our kids play outside, we limit technology, and we value relationships and connection. We focus on building character." As a family, they have chosen not to do a lot of extra-curricular activities in order to have more flexibility in their family time, and they have family dinner as often as possible.

**Mr. Campbell.**

Mr. Campbell is Chris's father. He has two older children: a 16 year old son and a 15 year old daughter. Mr. and Mrs. Campbell met in high school and were married while in college. Both of their families live about two hours away. Mr. Campbell is the sales director for a commercial landscape firm in Atlanta, and his wife is a mortgage assistant. Mr. Campbell

acknowledged, "We have raised our kids relatively strictly, with limited input from our family due to distance." He continued, "We're both very open and honest with our kids, and try not to talk down to them or shelter them from any topics." Mr. Campbell is very involved in all three kids' educations and often supplements their schoolwork during the summer months. Regarding school expectations, he noted, "We try to set high standards and expectations for the kids. My request is that grades be 95% or higher for every subject."

**Mrs. Davis.**

Mrs. Davis is David's stepmother. She has been a parent to David since he was five years old. In addition to David, she is the mother to two other children. She works as a teacher at the local high school. She has been a teacher for 16 years. While she has a number of friends, she spends most of her time with her family. Following the birth of her youngest son, she was diagnosed with severe Crohn's disease, which resulted in a hysterectomy. Mrs. Davis lives with constant fatigue due in parts to medications, anemia, and Crohn's disease. Even though most of it is sedentary, she loves to fill her time with her family.

**Mrs. Edwards.**

Mrs. Edwards is Eric's mother. She is completing her master's degree in education and currently works in a management position at a local restaurant. In addition to Eric, she has three other children. The family was living with her parents, but recently moved into their own home. Mrs. Edwards was married to Mr. Edwards for 15 years before they divorced six years ago. She now shares custody: the boys live with her during the week and their father on the weekends. She is responsible for all education decisions and in charge of ensuring the boys adhere to all of their responsibilities. She admits to the difficulty of being a single parent. Regarding educational expectations, she acknowledged, "I tend to be more of a natural consequence kind of person. I'm

laid back. If you don't do your work, your grades fall, there's the consequence." She clarified, "Now mind you, if he does get really bad grades, I have other consequences besides the fact that his grades are off." Ultimately, she wants to "teach them to be responsible for themselves."

**Mrs. Fuller.**

Mrs. Fuller, Finley's mom. She has been married for 20 years. She has an adult stepson and two daughters. She has worked in collections and repossessions for 29 years. The Fuller family is very involved in their church community, and her parents, Finley's grandparents, are very close. She has always been actively involved in her daughters' lives. When the bullying Finley received was exposed, she became her child's biggest advocate.

**Mrs. Greer.**

Mrs. Greer is Gabbie's mother. She and Mr. Greer have been married for 16 years. She worked in sales as an Account Executive for Transamerica Commercial Finance for 17 years. Once she became a mom, she made the decision to stay at home with Gabbie and her younger son. Mrs. Greer says, "We have tried to instill faith in our children by attending church and praying together as a family. We make it a point to eat meals together and our favorite pastime is spending quality time together as a family." Both Mr. and Mrs. Greer are equally I involved in parenting and have "set clear expectations for behavior and responsibility, including grades."

**Teacher Participant Profiles**

**Mrs. Howard.**

Mrs. Howard is a married mother of two and has been teaching for 10 years at the middle school level. She has taught both regular education classes and SCOPE classes. Both of her children are in the SCOPE program. Due to her own children's giftedness, she has an understanding of the needs of gifted children.

Students in her class have the opportunity to collaborate and move around the room as needed. It is not unusual to find a student sitting or lying on the floor while completing assignments. She describes her classroom environment as "structured but allows for independent student choice and opportunities for students to exhibit mature responsibility." She continued,

Students understand that my expectations are high both academically and behaviorally. They also understand that I am a forgiving and compassionate person and will treat them justly and fairly in any given situation. I believe that my classroom environment allows for students to feel safe, supported, and respected not only by me but their peers as well.

**Mrs. Jones.**

Mrs. Jones has been teaching for 29 years at the middle school level. She has been in a committed relationship for 20 years. She taught SCOPE classes for the past 15 years. In addition to teaching, she owns a folk art gallery with her partner.

Mrs. Jones has high expectations for her students and builds her class around a hands-on, investigative approach to learning. She shared,

I teach sixth and seventh grade ELA, so I have designed my class on a two-year rotation of units. When we study the Titanic, we examine and read numerous sources. Collaboration is common in my classroom. I think it is important because we can all learn from one another.

**Mrs. King.**

Mrs. King is a mother of two and has been teaching for 10 years at the elementary school level. She has taught regular education, EIP, and SCOPE classes. The SCOPE class she teaches is a pull-out reading and writing class. She often tries to collaborate with students' social studies teachers in order to provide a cross-curricular learning experience. Regarding her approach to

student instruction, she noted, "My classroom is project oriented and student focused. We dive into projects that provide instruction across curriculum for a variety of learning styles." When describing her classroom environment, she says,

> I have high expectations for all my students. I want to see them try their best and be successful. I feel like if I have a relationship with my students. I provide a lot of positive reinforcement and encouragement. I like to make learning fun and exciting.

**Mr. Lewis.**

Mr. Lewis is a father of one and has been teaching for 16 years at the middle school level. He has been a SCOPE teacher for the last five years. He is also the middle school's basketball coach.

Mr. Lewis works collaboratively with his co-workers who are also SCOPE teachers. He tries to "provide a hands-on approach to learning." He is always willing to try new ideas and often allows students the opportunity to demonstrate their creativity. He often "offers students the opportunity to design their own project." He shared,

> As a teacher, I want my students engaged in their learning and hopefully taking ownership. In order for that to happen, I have to be willing to allow for a little controlled chaos so that students have more freedom to work and collaborate with one another.

**Mr. Martin**

Mr. Martin is a married father of three and has been teaching for four years. He is a self-professed geek and often incorporates pop culture references in his teaching. He was raised by educators and school was always very important in his life.

Mr. Martin's classroom "functions as a guided forum, where students are presented with problems and can present reasoning for proposed solutions." He noted, "We rely on any and all

technology available, which mostly consists of student-owned devices, as well as web tools to promote collaboration with peers. He described his approach to student instruction,

My approach to education borrows heavily from the philosophical schools of Socrates and constructivism. I believe that students learn best by experience, and 21$^{st}$ century learners experience the vast majority of their lives in social contexts. Therefore, questioning, critique, and reasoning are the best tools for imparting useful knowledge.

**Results**

Each of the 19 participants chose the location for their interview. Parent and student interviews were conducted at a public location such as a coffee shop or fast-food restaurant while teacher interviews took place at their school. Student participants completed a questionnaire, which included the same 11 questions as outlined in Table 1. Each student participant was asked the same 12 questions as outlined in Table 2; however, when needed for clarification, additional questions were included. Each parent participant was asked the same seven questions as outlined in Table 4 with additional questions added as needed for clarification. Each teacher participant was asked the same seven questions as outlined in Table 3 with additional questions added as needed for clarification. The length of each interview varied from approximately one hour to one hour and thirty minutes. Every interview was audio-recorded and transcribed using a professional transcriptionist. Once the transcription was complete, I checked the transcriptions for accuracy. Aside from a few grammatical issues that were corrected, the accuracy of the transcription was complete. After collection of all the data, it was then analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology.

In order to arrive at the themes and sub-themes, the data was first coded. In qualitative research, coding is a "word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient,

essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data"
(Saladana, 2013, p. 3). In this study, I chose to first in vivo code the data then pattern code the
data for refinement. In vivo coding allows the researcher to "prioritize and honor the
participant's voice (Saldana, 2003, p. 91). According to Saldana (2013), "the child and
adolescent voices are often marginalized, and coding with their actual words enhances and
deepens an adult's understanding of their cultures and worldviews" (p. 91). After I in vivo coded
the data, I needed to condense the codes by finding the patterns in the codes. Pattern codes "pull
together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis…Pattern
coding is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or
constructs" (Miles & Hubermann, 1994, p. 69).

In this study, lack of inspiration to achieve was generally defined as gifted students not
performing to their potential resulting in academic gifted probation. According to the state of
Georgia, a local board of education must have a continuation policy for students receiving gifted
services. Gifted students must maintain satisfactory performance in order to maintain eligibility.
Failure to maintain satisfactory performance results in a probationary period in which students
continue to receive services while trying to achieve satisfactory performance status (Georgia
Department of Education, 2014). In Sunnydale school district, the satisfactory performance level
was an 80 or higher in academic classes at the end of each grading period. Any gifted student
with less than an 80 would be placed on academic probation.

Originally, the focus of this study was why gifted middle school students were uninspired
to achieve. These were not just underachieving students, but students who appeared to be so
uninspired and unmotivated they were placed on academic probation. However, as the student
participants shared their experiences and their parents voiced similar experiences, the focus of

the study shifted. In the process of interviewing all participants and analyzing the data, what emerged was less about inspiration, which is an evoked emotion or feeling (Oleynick, Thrash, LeFew, Moldovan, & Kieffaber, 2014; Thrash & Elliot, 2003; 2004), and more about academic engagement. When asked to define the word *inspired,* student participants' responses evoked feelings regarding a vision or an idea to strive toward. For example, Brittany defined inspired as "a vision for something that starts a vision" whereas David described it as "something that makes you better." Interestingly, continual immersion in the data caused the focus of the study to shift from inspiration to engagement, and subsequently, two main themes emerged: (a) Gifted Learners Experience Disengagement and (b) Gifted Learners Experience Re-engagement. These themes were then clustered into similar (but also somewhat antithetical) sub-themes of relationships, challenge, and voice. For gifted learners experiencing disengagement, negative relationships, which involved both teacher and peer relationships, lack of challenge or insurmountable challenge, and lack of voice were sub-themes resulting in disengagement. In addition, positive relationships, which included parent, teacher, and peer relationships, appropriately challenged, and voice were sub-themes leading to the re-engagement of these students.

### Themes

Students who are engaged feel more inspired, which in turn leads to increased motivation. However, when factors are present that compromise student engagement, a culture of disengagement ensues. Coding the data revealed that negative relationships, lack of challenge or insurmountable challenge, and lack of voice were cross-cutting sub-themes resulting in the disengagement of those students. The presence of these factors had a detrimental effect leading

to the placement of these students on academic probation. However, the data also revealed that these students, with the right interventions, were able to become re-engaged.

**Gifted Learners Experience Disengagement**

Gifted middle school learners in this study gave voice to their shared experience as disengaged students, whose disengagement consequently led to their placement on academic probation. While each student and parent participant described individual accounts of their own experience, the overall essence of this shared experience resulted in a harmonious voice depicting the factors affecting disengagement. In following section, the sub-themes of negative relationships, lack of challenge or insurmountable challenge, and lack of voice—and how these factors contributed to gifted students' experience of disengagement—will be discussed.

   **Negative Relationships.**

Negative relationships are an integral part of the disengagement of these gifted middle school students. Any relationship has the potential to have a positive or negative impact on those involved. When children are a part of the relationship, the impact could potentially have a greater effect than adults realize. Each of the student participants had a negative teacher relationship that stifled their desire to achieve. Furthermore, negative peer relationships contributed to the disengagement of these gifted middle school learners. In the following section the sub-theme of relationships is clustered into negative teacher relationships and negative peer relationships.

   *Teachers.*

Just as each student had a positive teacher relationship that impacted their desire to achieve, each student discussed the impact of negative teacher relationships on their motivation and inspiration to achieve. Even the parents acknowledged the effect of this relationship and how

greatly it impacted their child's achievement. The students were extremely vocal when discussing a particular teacher with whom they did not share a positive relationship.

Andrew was vocal about his 6th grade Language Arts teacher. He commented, "She retired and that's good for all the people coming up after me." He elaborated on why he made this statement, "She was just kind of really biased towards the girls. If there would be a guy standing up or guys talking, she would always yell at us and be fine with whatever the girls were doing." He also detailed the teacher's treatment of another student,

> I just didn't like how she handled stuff. One time she called a kid crazy and he would not do well in life because he was unorganized. We could tell that she just really didn't like him. It was just stuff like that which she did that I really didn't like.

Mrs. Allen shared the following about Andrew regarding his effort in her classroom.

> Last year he had a teacher who he felt like favored the girls tremendously. At the end of the year, he did not give 100% in the class, but he did not care because he felt like she had an attitude towards the boys. [His teacher] even contacted me personally and gave me parenting advice on the last Friday of her career before she retired. He did not respect her since he did not feel respected by her; therefore, he did not give his best.

Brittany shared frustration with a 6th grade teacher whose classroom was rigidly structured with no real teacher-student interaction. She shared, "My teacher didn't teach us, she didn't talk to us, she'd show us videos and then give us worksheets to fill out about that." Brittany, who was not a behavior concern, was extremely frustrated by the lack of classroom management. Mrs. Barrett shared, "Brittany was often frustrated by this teacher who was overwhelmed and not always handling the classroom management in the best way." According

to Mrs. Barrett, Brittany was frustrated by "the perceived arbitrary consequences for other students' actions" given by this same teacher.

Chris, David, Eric, and Gabbie shared similar accounts of teachers that appeared detached and disconnected with students. David shared his frustration with his 6th grade math teacher.

> She wouldn't really teach us the material. She would put notes on the board for us to copy and then give us an assignment. She would say, 'I expect you to complete this by whatever day it was due and then I'll give you another assignment.' I must say I did quite poorly in that class because of that.

David was very frustrated by his lack of voice with some teachers. "It just eats away at me when people, when my teachers say, 'Oh, you're a student, you don't have a voice. You do what we say. It infuriates me." Eric's move from a very small school district to the much larger Sunnydale School District was difficult for him. Mrs. Edwards shared that he struggled "because he went where there were 15 gifted students that had always been together to a much larger group." In addition, she noted that he did not have the same personal connections with his teachers that he did at his previous school. Eric admits, "In 6th and 7th grade, I don't feel like any of my teachers really knew me, or understood what I needed". His mother elaborated, "Eric's not going to really push himself very much if it's not somebody behind him going, 'Hey, you have to do this.'"

Chris was frustrated by a teacher who did very little to engage students. "She would teach by just going up to the front with a power point. There was no discussion." He also shared frustration with a teacher who gave extra assignments as an "add on that the SCOPE kids need to do." Gabbie and her mother, Mrs. Greer, shared about Gabbie's frustration with her 6th grade

math teacher. Gabbie acknowledged, "Math was very difficult in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and I really struggled with the content. I had trouble understanding the content based on how the teacher presented it." Mrs. Greer shared, "In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, she had her first male math teacher, and she had trouble following his very dry teaching style. She could not connect with his personality and lost interest."

Finley did not have a great relationship with any of her teachers in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade. For her, she felt her teachers ignored her complaints of bullying. She shared, "I was always getting bullied. I went up to my teacher and asked him a thousand times, 'Can you move her away from me?' Because he would always forget, he would put her back beside me." She continued,

> It just upsets me when you tell a teacher something and they don't even listen to you.
> That's what needs to change. If somebody tells you that they are being bullied you need
> to listen, you don't need to pass over them. You need to at least tell somebody that it's
> happening.

### *Peers.*

In middle school, peers have a vital role in the life of a middle school student. For the gifted students in this study, the peers surrounding them had a significant impact on their engagement. At the point of disengagement, their interactions and relationships with their peers were less than positive. For some students, it was simply being in a class with students who were less motivated while others shared feelings of insecurities of being in class with peers who were not friends. One student even discussed the impact bullying had on her engagement.

Finley's experience in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade highlight the negative impact peer relationships can have on one's educational journey. She shared, "Middle school wasn't that great because I was bullied a lot, and it finally ended in 8<sup>th</sup> grade." Mrs. Fuller shared that Finley's grades went

from straight A's to C's and F's. Finley acknowledged the peers who bullied her contributed to her drop in grades. "In sixth grade, the bullies were actually in my class." When asked how this impacted her learning, she responded, "I couldn't focus. I always thought about when is the next time this person is going to do something." Mrs. Fuller also acknowledged the impact of Finley's Autism diagnosis and the lack of peer relationships. "When you have Asperger's you're not socially…socially you're impaired. Social interaction with peers is difficult. She was socially awkward and didn't have the motivation and encouragement from peers."

Brittany admitted whom she is around is an important part of her academic success. She shared, "If I see people that are acting up and doing poorly on tests, it doesn't help me." She even described herself as a "monkey-see monkey-do" type of person. Mrs. Barrett commented, "[Brittany] was often frustrated by the peers she encountered." During her sixth grade year, Mrs. Barrett shared that Brittany was "disinterested in school…She wasn't with her friends…and she wasn't doing her best."

Andrew, Chris, David, Eric, and Gabbie don't share a lot of details regarding negative peer relationships, but still briefly addressed their experiences. David admitted, "When I'm with people I don't really know, I can't really communicate without sounding stupid." Eric shared that he has not been close with his classmates due to his move to the district at the beginning of middle school. Gabbie discussed her feelings of insecurity and awkwardness with a particular classmate. She noted, "[The female classmate] has always been really rude. One time she told me the boy I liked hated my guts. Why would she say that? It made it difficult to be around her, but we had all of our classes together. I am already very awkward, so that didn't help." Andrew, who considers himself an athlete, was often frustrated by the gifted stereotype other gifted students placed on the group as a whole. He shared, "When a teacher asked us to give him an example of

a football player for an example, a girl stated, 'We're all nerds, we don't know any sports players at all.' It was frustrating because I know sports." Mrs. Allen shared that Andrew would often request to be removed from SCOPE classes in order to be around different peers.

**Lack of Challenge or Insurmountable Challenge.**

Student and parents voiced a strong desire for challenge, but frustration and disengagement resulted when the rigor was not present, or the rigor was insurmountable. All the student participants shared similar experiences of frustration when faced with already mastered content or with tasks that seem impossible to master.

Andrew shared his frustration with teachers teaching or re-teaching previously learned content. "I don't like how sometimes, if you have already learned stuff from the earlier year, when teachers go back over it as if they think you have never learned it before." He continued, "I like learning new things. I don't like having to "learn" things that we already know and have to go over."

Mrs. Barrett and Brittany both shared their frustration with how gifted students were served in Science and Social Studies at her school. Brittany stated, "My school does a really bad job at advanced social studies and advanced science. I really wish there was a class meant for that. Instead we are lumped into class with other students." Mrs. Barrett shed more light on these classes.

> Brittany's science classes are collaborative, with gifted students mixed with some lower achieving students or students who need support in the classroom. I believe that she has not been challenged in the same way in these two classes, though her favorite teacher is her social studies teacher.

Mrs. Barrett also shared, "When it comes to Brittany's difficulties in school, it appears to me as her parent that she is not sufficiently challenged." In discussing why she was disinterested in school in 6$^{th}$ grade, Brittany shared with her mother that "she didn't feel challenged." The middle schools have an extended learning period in addition to academics. Brittany stated, "We have ELT, but it's a mix of advanced, below averages, like all come together…I'm hearing things repeatedly that may be good for on-level or under-level students, but these are things I already know." She also addressed when the challenge is insurmountable, "I don't like it when [teachers] expect far too much from you, things you are not capable of doing."

Chris, David, and Eric discussed the lack of challenge early on in middle school. Chris referred to his sixth grade year as "babysitting." David and Eric both were disengaged with math in particular. They both shared their teachers kept re-teaching previously learned concepts. David even shared the "lack of real world examples" in math made it seem pointless. David even shared his frustration with the same math teacher who "didn't really teach us the material. She would just put problems on the board and give us an assignment to complete…I often didn't understand how to complete the problems…I failed Algebra class that year."

Andrew shared his frustration with teachers teaching or re-teaching previously learned content. "I don't like how sometimes, if you have already learned stuff from the earlier year, when teachers go back over it as if they think you have never learned it before." He continued, "I like learning new things. I don't like having to "learn" things that we already know and have to go over." He also mentioned, "Last year in science I didn't really learn anything. She just gave us things." He explained the "things" given to him were worksheets.

Gabbie and Finley shared they appreciated a challenge, but were often frustrated when the challenge seemed impossible. Gabbie admitted, "If it's too challenging or seems impossible,

I tend to shut down and feel insecure about my ability." Finley shared her frustration with how her teachers taught.

It is frustrating when teachers taught above my level and I didn't understand anything because they didn't really explain anything. That is what my math teacher in 6th grade did. She did not explain a thing…She was like, 'Here's a worksheet. You need to do it.' I feel like we [as a class] were definitely overlooked because we were gifted, we were supposed to know what we were supposed to do. She didn't explain anything to us.

**Lack of Voice.**

For each of the middle school students, not having a voice, or choice, in the type of work they produced or with whom they would collaborate often led to disengagement. All seven students eagerly shared their experiences because they desired for their voices to be heard. In the following section the sub-theme of voice is clustered into no choice in work and no choice in collaboration.

### *No Choice in Work.*

Not having the opportunity to express a choice in the type of work or products produced was a contributing factor in disengagement for these particular students. Most students shared a lack of motivation for assignments that they were required to complete yet had no voice in the final product.

Student and parent participants had similar experiences. Mrs. Barrett acknowledged, "When Brittany is not interested in something, she will not work on it, no matter the incentive I might try to give her." Finley, Gabbie, Eric, and Chris shared similar thoughts. Eric admitted, "When I'm not really interested in something, I don't do a great job. I tend to procrastinate and do just enough to get a passing grade."

Mrs. Allen, Andrew's mother, shares a similar sentiment regarding Andrew. "When Andrew is not interested in the assignment, he does not put forth effort. He only does enough to get what he considers is a decent grade." She elaborated,

> Recently he had a project in one class and he had to create a booklet on the computer. His comment was that 'an hour to work on the project was sufficient' because an hour correlated to what his grade would be to get a sufficient grade and for the point system given. He though it was ludicrous for the value grade being given to the project that he should put forth any more effort than an hour's worth of work.

David acknowledged that teachers have standards to teach, but gets frustrated with the lack of voice he has in his learning.

> In Language Arts, I don't mind writing, I just prefer to pick my on topic. We need to be able to pick a topic that we can successfully debate or compare to other things. They give us something stupid like the metric system that could be incorporated in the United States. How do you think that would happen? I simply wrote in my paper, 'Well, it'd cost a lot of money and it'd be quite ridiculous. So, no. We may be in line with the rest of the world but thing about our economy.' My teacher wasn't very happy with my response.

### *No Choice in Collaboration.*

Collaboration is often a key component in a middle school classroom. Each student preferred working with a peer versus working alone; however, all seven of these students desired to have a voice in their collaborative partnerships. Interwoven within the data was a clear frustration when students had no voice regarding who would be their partner.

Gabbie and David both acknowledged frustration with the lack of choice in collaboration. Gabbie shared her annoyance when she is forced to work with someone she would not normally

choose. "It's hard because you aren't guaranteed that the person will do her part. I usually take charge and do the majority of the work so that it is finished." David noted, "I don't like when my teacher picks my partner because most of the time she'll put me with someone that I don't know, or that I just don't work well with." Regarding his favorite teacher, David shared,

My teacher is a pretty good teacher, and I've learned a lot from her, but she doesn't let us pick our partners. She will, this really kills me right here, she will number us off in groups…I don't like that because most of the time I get put with a bunch of people I don't know.

Chris shared about a project his science teacher gave the class. In order to break up the SCOPE students, she required a SCOPE student to work with a non-SCOPE student in the classroom. Chris explained, "Some of us were complaining, and she said she wanted to see how we could work in a different environment than we are used to. I didn't really like it at all."

Andrew, Brittany, Eric, and Finley shared similar experiences. Andrew acknowledged frustration when teachers pick groups. He stated, "You may be stuck in a group with someone that performs at a lower level than you. Or, you could get stuck with someone you aren't friends with." Brittany admitted, "I don't like when teachers go, 'One, Two, Three. One, Two, Three. One's in a group. Two's in a group. Three's in a group.' They need to consider there are people that won't work well together for different reasons." Eric and Finley both shared their desire for their voice to be heard regarding collaborative partners, both also admitted to feeling frustrated when their choice was ignored.

**Gifted Learners Experience Re-Engagement**

While disengagement and lack of inspiration and motivation were all defining characteristics of these students who were placed on academic probation, interestingly the

students were able to become reengaged and find new success in their SCOPE program. Certain aspects collectively refreshed the engagement and motivation these students were formerly lacking. Among these aspects are positive relationships with their parents, teachers and their peers. In addition to these positive relationships, these students were able to find inspiration in tasks, which were appropriately challenging as well as having the opportunity to have their voices acknowledged. The chance to make choices in their learning as well as receiving positive reinforcement for academic successes contributed to the engagement of these students. All factors were powerful in reengaging these students.

**Positive Relationships.**

Positive relationships are an integral part of the re-engagement of these gifted middle school students. Each participant in this study had a positive parental relationship, which provided a foundation and support for their learning. Furthermore, the importance of peer relationships was clearly evident. The main participants, the students, and the supporting participants in this narrative, the parents, acknowledged the importance of teacher relationships in achievement of students. Every participant in this story had an account of a positive teacher relationship, which inspired him or her. In the following section the sub-theme of relationships is clustered into parental relationships, positive teacher relationships, and positive peer relationships.

*Parents.*

The parental relationship for each of the student participants in this study serves as the foundation and framework for these students. It was clear that each student had a close relationship with one, if not both, of his or her parents. For six of the students, one of their parents served as a role model. Based on parent interviews, involvement in their child's life was

important. Each parent-child relationship entailed a connection not associated with education whether it was sports, church, or simple family time. The balance between academic support and non-academic support provided a sanctuary of support for each student. This sanctuary of support provided the stability the students needed to be able to become engaged academically.

The Allens are a family who values time together and will incorporate sporting events and camping into their schedule to create family time. In addition, they are a family with strong ties to their church family. While Andrew is close with both parents, it was evident through his interview that he has a close bond with his dad. He identified his dad as his role model. He shares,

> My dad will always try to help me. I didn't know how to do the yard six months ago. He taught me how to start everything, and how to do it, and use it, and now I know how to do all of those things. I wouldn't have if he hadn't taught me. He's someone I look to for instructions for help.

At one point, Andrew wanted to be removed from the gifted program because he felt he was missing out in the regular education classes. Mrs. Allen acknowledges, "We never listened to his requests." After repeated requests for removal, the Allens arranged for Andrew to get advice from a family friend, who was also a school administrator at the high school. The family friend convinced Andrew to not make any decisions until he was in high school. "Not until we really explained to him that being in the gifted program is a privilege, and for him to be thankful for his talents and the special opportunity he had to attend class did his attitude change." Mrs. Allen acknowledged that after this discussion, he had a positive attitude about staying in the gifted program.

The Barretts are a close-knit family. When Brittany was five, her baby sister was born with a heart issues. She had a heart transplant, but died three years later from complications. As a result, the Granger family grew even closer. They value family time and are willing to forgo many extra-curricular activities in order to eat dinner together most nights. During her sixth grade year, Brittany had many discussions with her mother about her frustrations with school. Mrs. Barrett acknowledged the change in her daughter from 5th to 6th grade. "When we tried to process through what was going on, she refused to see a counselor, and instead wanted to talk to me about how she was feeling about school." This is a clear indicator of the close bond that mother and daughter share. In addition, Brittany, without hesitation, named her mother as her role model.

The Campbells are actively involved in the lives of their children. Regarding education, Chris's parents are involved and have high expectations. When Chris's grades declined at the beginning of 7th grade, Mr. Campbell admits to not being "diligent about checking homework nightly." Mr. Campbell did sit down to discuss the drop in grades. Mr. Campbell admitted, "Chris tends to get emotional when honest discussion of grades and academic accomplishments arises." This was clear when Chris teared up and confessed, "Seeing the grade or seeing the paper that comes out and you're on probation, it's upsetting. So with my dad's help, I chose to work harder." In non-academic pursuits, Chris and Mr. Campbell have a strong bond on the soccer field. Chris has grown up playing soccer. He now plays on a Select Soccer travel team. He has practice three days a week with weekend games. His dad is his coach, which ensures quality father-son time. While his dad often worries that being his dad and coach may stifle Chris, Chris admits that his relationship with his dad and soccer are motivators for him to do well.

The Davises became a family when David was five years old. Mrs. Davis recalls the feelings she felt when David and Mr. Davis entered her life. "I fell in love with David and couldn't imagine my life without him in it." Since Mr. Davis married Mrs. Davis, they have added two more boys to their family. Family time is often spent watching movies together or playing games. David and his family have become more involved in their church, and David often asks to lead the family in prayer. Mrs. Davis and David both identify Mr. Davis as the most important relationship to David. David noted, "My dad is my role model. I look up to him because I am most like him." Mrs. Davis acknowledged, "David is happiest when he is outside working with his daddy."

The Edwards family has struggled for a few years through divorce and living with grandparents. For the past year, Mrs. Edwards and her boys have been living in their own home. The boys are close with one another. This was evident to Mrs. Edwards when they willingly chose to all four share a room. Even though Mrs. Edwards works full-time and is working on her master's degree, she seeks to ensure she and the boys have family time. David will often seek to relax with his mom. She shares, "He's very much, 'let's relax.' I'll read a book or watch T.V. He'll get on his tablet and he'll create something." Eric acknowledged his mother as his role model but also expressed gratitude for her encouragement in his interests.

> When I was younger, I watched Hercules with my mom. I had lots of questions about mythology, so she bought me a mythology book by Edith Hamilton. We would read it together. I really appreciate that she always encourages me to learn more about what interests me.

The Fuller family shares a close bond that was cemented through adversity. Both Mrs. Fuller and Finley share openly about the struggles Finley faced in the years she was bullied. Both

Finley and Mrs. Fuller teared up as they described the impact the bullying had on Finley. What became evident was a deep bond between mother and daughter as they worked through hardship and obstacles. Finley acknowledged that her motivation to work hard comes from parental support, particularly her mother. "My mom will call me into her office. We may talk about the good grades I have, or discuss if I got a bad grade. Whenever I do something good, she's so proud of me."

The Greers are a close-knit family of four. Faith has been at the center of their family with a focus on attending church regularly and praying together as a family. Mrs. Greer has made eating together as a family a priority. Both Gabbie and Mrs. Greer share that they love spending quality time together as a family. Gabbie shared, "My mom and I are close. Most of the time I share my concerns with her about my classes especially if there is a particular assignment I am struggling with. She is also always willing to make store runs when I am working on a project." Mrs. Greer has been encouraged that Gabbie still confides in her even in her middle school years. She shared,

> Gabbie is much more self-conscious in these middle school years. She confided in me
> that she considers herself somewhat of a misfit and worries more about her awkward
> appearance and being accepted by others. She has been diagnosed with worsening
> scoliosis condition and that has increased her fears about being different. While she is
> more insecure and emotional on the inside, she still strives for excellence.

The voice of the teachers in this study adds an additional layer of support to the importance of the parent-child relationship. When asked about the differences they see between motivated and inspired gifted students and those who are not, each one identified parent involvement as a factor. Mrs. Howard stated, "Home life and parental involvement seem to be

the largest factor affecting gifted student motivation and achievement." Similarly, Mrs. Jones noted, "In my 15 years of teaching gifted students, the ones with a strong support system at home seem to be successful. My students who struggle tend to lack a strong parental connection, or their time is divided a lot between mom's house and dad's house." Mr. Martin acknowledged, "Motivated gifted students are genuinely rewarded by their family." Mrs. King stated, "My motivated gifted students are excited to take projects home to work on with their mom or dad." Mr. Lewis shared, "Parental involvement and parental follow through tend to be a big factor in gifted student achievement. When the parental support structure is lacking, I tend to see these kids continue to struggle."

### *Teachers.*

All seven students associated positive educational experiences with a teacher with whom they shared a connection. Through the experiences the students shared it is clear that these teacher relationships not only had a positive impact in the classroom and on the students' motivation to achieve, but also served as a teacher standard for these students. Without prompting, each student discussed at least one relationship and expounded on why the relationship was so positive. In addition, the parents highlighted a positive teacher relationship as an important, positive impact in their child's life. A major reason all seven students re-engaged was due to all of them connecting with a new teacher; thus, giving them a new positive relationship, a new outlook, and new opportunities. Meaningful relationships with teachers and gifted student success are not only supported by the literature (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, Choi, 2011; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010), but also by the findings of this study.

Both Brittany and Andrew described teachers who joked around and played music in order to create a relaxed, comfortable environment. Brittany noted, "My favorite teacher looped up with us to seventh grade…He plays folk songs. He's so funny, and he likes to joke about things. I love that. It makes things less tense." She continued, "Before a test he will joke about something like, 'Don't fail, please. You can do bad, just don't fail.' It kind of lightens it up and so I like that." Andrew noted a similar experience: "[My favorite teacher] was a great teacher. He played music when we would do tests. His classroom was a comfortable environment."

Both Eric and David acknowledge a connection to a teacher who was nice. When asked why he liked his current math teacher, David responded, "She is nice to us, and she'll joke around with us." Eric noted, "I like my science teacher because she is nice to me." Finley was encouraged by an email a teacher sent to her mother. She noted, "My science teacher sent my mom an email, and she said, 'Finley's doing fabulous in here, and she's helping other students, and things like that.' I was encouraged and amazed that she did that."  She continued, "For students like me, it helps a lot when you can actually talk one-on-one because it just makes them feel so much better about themselves."

Feeling supported and validated in their educational journey was also extremely important.  Finley contended, "My math teacher was more understanding than anybody. She would talk to us one-on-one. Overall, my eighth grade teachers took an interest in seeing me exceed, which made me want to do better."  Andrew shared that he had the world's greatest teacher. When asked what made him great, Andrew said,

> He had these bricks that were sheets of paper that, if you have a 95 or above average in the class, you would get one and you could design it and put it on the wall. There were people from past years. It was cool to see and great to add my own brick to the wall.

Mrs. Allen noted that Andrew is more motivated "when he feels inspired and encouraged by his teacher." Gabbie acknowledges that recognition is important. She noted, "Recognition is a great motivator. I appreciate when my teachers acknowledge that I have done a good job." Gabbie has struggled in math. Mrs. Greer shared about the encouragement Gabbie received from her 7th grade math teacher, "Her math teacher suggested that Gabbie was capable of the more advanced class because she was doing very well, and she was actually teaching her problem solving techniques to other students." This increased Gabbie's confidence in math as well as her positive feelings about math. Her mother continued, "With her, a little praise goes a very long way."

Having a teacher willing to step back and really determine student needs helped to establish a positive relationship. Andrew noted that it was important for teachers to understand the student's perspective. Regarding his favorite teacher—

> If we had any questions, he would kind of think like us and understand that. If everyone
> in the class got bad grades, he would take personal responsibility, not count them,
> re-teach us the stuff in a different form so that we might understand it. Especially in like
> math; that happened once and he re-taught it and then we understood it and was fine.

Similarly, Finley noted, "My math teach is amazing. She explains things and slows down a little bit for us even though it is an honors class." Brittany appreciated the flexibility her teacher provided. She shared her social studies teacher's philosophy,

> He always says, 'Whatever works best for you works best for me.' Like most of the time
> it says on a project to make a presentation. Instead of a presentation, I can make a model.
> That works for him as long as you're fulfilling it.

Chris acknowledged the autonomy his science teacher gave SCOPE students in their learning. "She lets you branch off and fly on your own and do how you would like to do the project and see how creative you can be with it."

### *Peers.*

In this story, peer relationships were an essential component to the success of each student. Parents and students both acknowledged the importance of surrounding themselves with like-minded students who encouraged and challenged one another to succeed.

Brittany discussed with her parents her frustrations with her 6$^{th}$ grade year. Mrs. Barrett shared,

> She has shared with us the importance of surrounding herself with positive peers, as she noticed that has been a difference in her motivation and follow through. Brittany drew the connection that it mattered who she was with in her classes, as she did better when she was with friends who pushed her to do her best work. She seems most happy when she is around those positive relationships.

Brittany acknowledged, "The people I am around is really important for me because I'm a 'monkey-see, monkey-do' kind of person. If I see people who are excelling and doing really well then it helps me. If I see people that are acting up and doing poorly on tests, it doesn't help me." She later shared,

> My best friends are twins from Kenya. They're really good about doing their homework, love to do projects involving school, and so I think that's definitely helped me. Last year, I didn't have any classes with them. I felt like I was kind of slacking in my work a little bit more. I have them in my classes this year, and I feel like they kind of get me to be better in class and I like that.

Mrs. Barrett shared about how at the end of 6th grade Brittany and her best friends had "come up with a fundraiser for a special project and were recognized by the principal as the end of the year assembly for their leadership among their peers." She smiled and noted, "The Brittany we knew was back."

Chris shared about how peer relationships have an influence on his achievement. He stated, "Most of my friends are in the SCOPE program, and they're not a bad influence, so I feel like they encourage me to do more." He also shared that friendly competition with his peers pushes him to try harder. "There is definitely competition among the SCOPE kids. We all want to be king of the hill and have the highest average. Since we are all competing, there is rarely a time where we fall down or fail." From Chris's perspective, the friendly competition with his peers spurred them on to be successful. "The more competitive you can get with someone about your grades, the more you guys will want to succeed. Not just more than that person, but in general."

Andrew, Eric, David, and Gabbie didn't spend delve as deep regarding peer relationships, but they did acknowledge the importance of peer relationships in their educational journey. Andrew shared, "Getting to be in class with my friends and talk with them helps me a lot. We can help each other understand something that might have been confusing in class or we just encourage each other to do our best." David acknowledged that he is shy and has a difficult time with people he doesn't know. He stated, "I prefer being around my friends. They are like me and understand me, so they can help me." Eric shared that he isn't very close with the people in his class, but rather he is closer to his brother who is a year ahead of him in school. Gabbie and her mother, Mrs. Greer, shared about the impact of Gabbie's peer relationships. Mrs. Greer stated, " Gabbie has always made friends easily. She seems to gravitate toward friends that were also high

achieving students." Mrs. Greer later added, "Gabbie's circle of friends are now much more important to her at this age, and she seems to seek their constant reassurance and approval." Gabbie shared,

> My friends and I have been in most of the same classes since 6$^{th}$ grade. We help each
>
> other especially when we don't understand something. I tend to struggle with math, and
>
> my friends will explain things in a way I understand because they know how to help me.

For the first two years of middle school, Finley dealt with bullying as well as depression and an Autism diagnosis. She admits to being socially awkward and having difficulty interacting with her peers. She did share one story of being paired with a student who struggles with social anxiety. She admitted that they both "clicked." It was said with a smile on her face.

**Appropriately Challenged.**

Interwoven throughout the interviews with the seven students was the need for challenge. Both parents and students spoke openly about desiring academic challenge. For these gifted middle school students, a key factor in their re-engagement included being appropriately challenged in all of their classes.

Brittany was vocal regarding her desire to be challenged. When she explained why she enjoyed her advanced classes, she stated, "So I like it when everything's kind of like designed for your level and that's why I like advanced, because it's designed exactly for your level and to help you." Brittany also shared what was important to her as a student. She voiced,

> Being challenged, but not being overchallenged, because I like teachers who do things
>
> that will stimulate you and kind of get you to learn and get you to become better. I don't
>
> like it when they expect far too much from you, things you are not capable of doing.

That's important to me, something that is challenging but not going to keep me up until 4

am make it too hard for me, but hard enough that I'm learning.

Gabbie loves to be challenged as long as she has some understanding of the concept

being taught. Similar to Brittany, Gabbie shares, "I like to be challenged and really problem

solve to find a solution. However, if it's too challenging or seems impossible, I tend to shut down

and feel insecure about my ability." Mrs. Greer discussed the reasoning for keeping Gabbie out

of the gifted, accelerated math class,

> Gabbie struggled with math as the material increased in difficulty. She hated math and
>
> struggled with understanding the concepts. As her math capabilities increased in the
>
> regular ed math class, we decided to keep her in the non-advanced math class because her
>
> confidence level had improved, as well as her feelings about math. It became fun again,
>
> and she no longer dreads it.

Chris appreciates the change from sixth to seventh grade. He said, "It's not like

babysitting anymore. There is more independent learning. Seventh grade has been more

challenging, which has been tough but I am learning a lot." David also appreciated the changes

in his 7th grade year, particularly in math. "The math was challenging, but my teacher used real

world examples. I aced that class." In spite of the hardships Finley faced during middle school,

she really appreciated being challenged academically with one small caveat. "I really like to

learn new things and be challenged. But I feel like it is really important for the teacher to teach

on the student's level. When that doesn't happen, I am just lost."

Eric and his mother discussed the changes from his previous school district to the

Sunnydale school district. Mrs. Edwards shared, "I think he's being challenged more. I think the

rigor is much better now, and I think he's beginning to realize where he might be a smart kid, he

has to put forth effort now." Eric acknowledged, "School has always been easy. Once we moved, my classes were harder. At first it was frustrating, but I wasn't bored in class anymore. I had to work hard for the first time."

**Voice.**

Student Voice refers to the active involvement of students who are able to make decisions regarding potential areas of study, products produced, and collaborative efforts on their educational journey (Rogers, 2005). Just as important as relationships were for these middle school students, having a voice in their educational journey was equally as vital in their academic re-engagement. All seven students were eager to share their thoughts in the interview because it provided a stage for their voice to be heard. Even several teachers acknowledged that students desired the chance to take charge of their learning and demonstrate their creativity. In the following section the sub-theme of voice is clustered into choice in work and choice in collaboration.

### *Choice in Work.*

Students having the opportunity to express their choice in the type of work or products completed was an integral piece in their academic engagement. Most students shared experiences of engagement when they felt they had a voice in their own work. One teacher, Mr. Martin, shared, "Gifted learners need the freedom to construct their own solutions to proposed problems or projects. It provides them with opportunities to showcase their creativity and encourages deeper understanding."

Gabbie and her mother shared about the importance of choice in educational assignments. Gabbie acknowledged, "I prefer when I have a choice in what type of project I do. Every year I have to complete a science fair project, but I get to choose what I study. I appreciate that I have

total control. Each year I have chosen something that was interesting to me." Gabbie also shared

that she has placed regionally at the science fair each year she has participated. Mrs. Greer

stated,

> Gabbie is motivated by a creative environment. When teachers assign meaningful
>
> assignments that require her to use creativity, I can see that she is much more
>
> engaged…She is more enthusiastic about completing a project if she has flexibility to
>
> plan it out and put her own spin on it. She likes using different materials for projects and
>
> typically finishes these types of craft projects with little encouragement, and often ahead
>
> of schedule.

Gabbie discussed an assignment for English that she completed earlier in the year. "We studied

the legend of the Wog." The local museum offered a challenge to all schools to create an exhibit

about the Wog. She shared, "My teacher gave very little requirements and gave us full control

over what we created. My group created a really cool display, and we placed 2$^{nd}$. I liked that we

were able to decide what to create."

Similarly, Brittany shared the importance of having a voice in the work she produces for

class. "My social studies always tells us, 'What works best for you is what works best for me.'

Sometimes a project will be to create a presentation. I don't really like using technology. I prefer

to write something or to create a model. As long as I show my understanding of the standard, I

can do it." She also noted, "I'm a hands-on, I'm a connect learner, I like hands-on things, and

activities where you're having a discussion." Mrs. Barrett shared that Brittany often complains

about the lack of hands-on learning and outside time as a whole in middle school. She discussed

a summer opportunity the school offers that Brittany loves.

Brittany has participated in a summer program for the past two years where she works in the school garden and helps run a school restaurant. This program, though only a few weeks in the summer for four hours each day Monday through Thursday, has been one of the highlights of middle school. She has gotten to work with teachers and other professionals, she has enjoyed the challenge beyond the school's curriculum, she has grown in her confidence. She has learned without even knowing it!

Mrs. Barrett also shared about Brittany's motivation to complete assignments when she has taken ownership.

When Brittany is motivated to do something, it gets done with no complaints or prompts. She goes above and beyond and does not limit herself to the bare minimum. When something is her idea, she is even willing to sacrifice screen time to complete it. She spends time planning it instead of rushing through it to get it done.

Brittany shared that she loves to write, but not when given a prompt. This was a sentiment reinforced by Mrs. Barrett. "Brittany enjoys writing more and does better work when she is not limited by an arbitrary writing prompt. She loves to draw connections and share her perspective on the world."

Eric and Mrs. Edwards discuss his motivation to achieve when he has an active voice in what he produces. Mrs. Edwards shared, "When Eric wants to do something, he doesn't just do the minimum requirement, he does the minimum requirement plus this over here and this over there and tries to figure out what else he can do." Eric acknowledged, "I really like to draw and create things on my tablet. If I had the choice, all of my projects would include art." His mother also shared about his science fair experience. Mrs. Edwards noted,

When he's motivated like the science fair project last year, and this year he did an extension of the one from last year, Eric is on it. He did all the research. He had all the background information. He knew exactly what he was going to do and how he was going to do it. He had everything all lined up and laid out and made sure everything got down. He did all the experiments. He did a great job.

Andrew and David both shared the importance of having a voice in their education pursuits. Andrew shared, "I prefer having a choice in the type of project that I complete. I also appreciate when teachers relate the information we are learning to something that interests me. For example, incorporating math into sports." He admits, "If I enjoy class and what we are learning, and I have a choice in how I show what I have learned, I'm going to enjoy going to class, respond better and try harder." David acknowledged that he wished he could create a podcast or give a speech instead of submitting an essay. His reasoning, "Personally, I speak a whole lot better than I write. I sometimes have a hard time making a connection from my head to the paper."

Finley really enjoys learning and prefers when learning is hands-on and fun. "I like learning a lot. It's like you learn something new everyday, so I definitely like that. But I miss the fun I had in elementary school. Middle school is harder, a lot of painstaking work." Finley and her both shared about a mythology unit in elementary school. Finley admitted, "I still remember learning about Greek mythology. We had a day where we dressed up as a Greek god or goddess we researched." Mrs. Fuller noted that Finley works harder when the project or assignment is something she picked or has peaked her interest. She shared a specific anecdote, "For science, Finley chose to create a paper roller coaster. She spent the entire weekend rolling paper to make the roller coaster. She was excited, engaged, and finished the project before the due date."

Chris shared how being an active participant with a voice was essential to his learning. "When my teacher has more interactive activities and discussions, it is easier to grasp." He shared that he prefers to work independently from the teacher, and even identified his favorite teacher as one who "gave us our project, but lets us really do our own thing and show our creativity." Mr. Campbell acknowledged, "A lot of schoolwork doesn't seem to be alluring or stimulating to him. As a result, he only puts in minimal effort." Chris did admit, "When I am interested in the topic or project, I am going to work harder especially if I can work with my friends."

### *Choice in Collaboration.*

Collaborating with peers is equally important to these students. Given the choice of collaborating with a partner or group and working independently, six of the seven students chose working with someone else with one small caveat: they wanted to choose the partner or group members. One student preferred working with a partner when the teacher made group assignments due to her anxiety in social situations.

Brittany was very vocal on collaboration with peers. "I prefer it when I can choose because I know who I'll work well with and who I'll slack off with." She continued,

I definitely think that group or partner work, mostly partner work, or groups of 3 help me a lot because when I'm alone—I'll do well, but kind of won't do as well as I could if I had good people pushing me to do better. I like it that different people bring in different influence into the project.

She shared about a big group project she completed in social studies.

Last year we did a project on Croatia…We were doing a project on it, like doing research on it. I learned but also I had a good time doing it with other people…Everyone was a

main person for a certain aspect of it, like culture or history, different things like that.

Even though we were mostly in charge of our portion, all of us were like, 'Oh, I found

this really cool website. It has a lot of information that you may need.' We kind of helped

each other, so I think that's great.

Similarly, Andrew, David, and Chris agreed on the importance of collaboration and the

choice of collaborative partners. Andrew stated, "I like group projects where we are all able to

work together." He explained why partnership choice was important to him.

I like when we're able to work together with other students that are on the same level as

we are. If the teacher picks our groups and we get someone who's not quite as smart and

things don't quite make sense to them, I would rather work individually.

David also shared, "Teachers need to incorporate group work. Let us talk to one another. I tend

to be more motivated when I am not working alone." He reiterated the same sentiment as

Andrew, "Having a choice in my partner is important."  Chris, regarding having a choice in

partners, shared,

I typically work with my friend on most things because he's in SCOPE, and we get things

done quicker and we're both easy to work with, so we do a lot of projects together. I

prefer to work with him just because I figure we could probably get the project done

faster and maybe a little better.

Gabbie shared similar views as the previous students. "I'm very social and I like to work

with my friends. We are able to bounce ideas off of each other. When I work with my friends, I

am confident that each person completes their part of the project."

Finley admitted that while she liked to collaborate with others, she is always anxious

when her partner isn't chosen for her. She acknowledged, "As long as the teacher picks my

partner, and I don't have to, because I don't like to ask others to be my partner. I like it best when the teacher picks my partner instead of me picking my partner." Mrs. Fuller shared, "I think the reason why is because she is the last person picked. Often times she is working with someone less motivated and she is left to do the project on her own." Finley did share about a positive collaborative experience with someone whom she could identify. "Today I was able to partner with someone who also has social anxiety. He tests in the same room I do. I worked with him today, and it's like we clicked. I surprised him, and he surprised me."

**Summary of Themes**

In this study, two major themes emerged: (a) Gifted Learners Experience Disengagement and (b) Gifted Learners Experience Re-engagement. These themes were then clustered into similar (but also somewhat antithetical) sub-themes of relationships, challenge, and voice. For gifted learners experiencing disengagement, the sub-themes were negative relationships, which involved both teacher and peer relationships, lack of challenge or insurmountable challenge, and lack of voice. For gifted learners experiencing re-engagement, the sub-themes were positive relationships, which included parent, teacher, and peer relationships, appropriately challenged, and voice were sub-theme.

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**Research Questions Answered**

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**Research Question One**

How do middle school gifted students describe the terms *inspired* and *motivation*?

When addressing the terms *inspired* and *motivated*, student participants described *inspired* as being a vision with *motivated* as the drive to want to achieve the vision. For example, Brittany shared, "I was inspired to be an architect. I know you have to have really good grades in science and math especially to do this, so that motivates me because I want to be doing my

dream job." Furthermore, participants shared how their own role model, who was one of their parents, served as a tangible reminder for their motivation and inspiration.

**Research Question Two**

How do gifted middle school students, their parents, and their teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve?

In response to how do gifted middle school students, their parents, and their teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve, participants' responses could be divided into two key themes: Gifted Learners Experience Disengagement and Gifted Learners Experience Re-engagement. All aspects of the school experience contributed to either the student's disengagement leading to academic probation, or the student's re-engagement leading to satisfactory academic performance. While each participant shared experiences unique to him or her, the essence of the shared experience shed much needed light on the impact of all educational experiences on the success of a gifted middle school student.

**Research Question Three**

What factors do participants identify as influencing their lack of inspiration to achieve?

When addressing the factors participants identified as influencing their lack of inspiration to achieve, what emerged was really a focus on disengagement and re-engagement. Based on participant interviews, the factors were relationships, challenge, and voice. The participants shared experiences that contributed to either disengagement or re-engagement. Negative relationships with teachers and peers led to disengagement. In addition, little challenge or insurmountable challenge as well as a lack of voice, be it work or collaboration, also contributed to disengagement. Factors affecting re-engagement included positive parent, teacher, and peer

relationships as well as being appropriately challenged. Furthermore, having a voice in their educational journey was important in the re-engagement of the students in this study.

**Research Question Four**

What impact does the lack of inspiration to achieve have on gifted middle school students' academic experiences and achievements?

For the gifted middle schools students in this study, the lack of inspiration to achieve was less about inspiration and more about disengagement and re-engagement. The impact of disengagement affected both gifted middle school students' academic experiences as well as achievements. The impact of disengagement on academic experiences resulted in frustration and anger of the students. This resulted in students making a choice to not work and often give up and shut down. As a result, their achievement was impacted leading to low grades and eventually academic probation. More importantly, learning stagnation may have occurred within the classroom; however, learning continued to take place in other venues.

## Summary

This chapter has focused on the seven middle school students who shared their experience regarding their experience disengaging—and ultimately-re-engaging as well as seven parents and five teachers whose voice contributed to the narrative. Character portraits were provided followed by a description of the three themes that emerged from their experiences. In this phenomenological study, triangulation of data included a student questionnaire, student interviews, parent interviews, and faculty interviews. Repeated readings of interview transcripts and student questionnaires and analysis of data using In Vivo coding helped me to identify significant statements from the stories shared by all the participants regarding the factors that affected gifted middle school students engagement. Further investigation resulted in the

emergence of two overall themes: (a) Gifted Learners Experience Disengagement (b) Gifted Learners Experience Re-engagement. These themes were then clustered into similar (but also somewhat antithetical) sub-themes of relationships, challenge, and voice.  In order to tell the story with every participant's voice present, multiple quotes have been included as these participants give voice to this shared experience.

**CHAPTER FIVE:  DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve. Chapter One provided a description of the study's purpose and its relevance. Chapter Four presented the findings that shifted the focus of the study from inspiration to academic engagement. Chapter Five provides a discussion of those findings. A brief examination of the study's limitations is provided. To conclude, I included recommendations for future research at the end of this chapter with the hope that future researchers will delve deeper into the factors that affect the engagement of middle school gifted learners.

**Summary of Findings**

As a result of careful data analysis including pre-coding and consistent with the emergent nature of qualitative research in general (along with In Vivo coding, Phenomenological Reduction, and Synthesis), the focus of the study shifted. The themes that emerged were less about inspiration, which is an evoked emotion or feeling (Oleynick, Thrash, LeFew, Moldovan, & Kieffaber, 2014; Thrash & Elliot, 2003; 2004), and more about academic engagement. The two themes were (a) Gifted Learners Experience Disengagement and (b) Gifted Learners Experience Re-engagement. These themes were then clustered into similar (but also somewhat antithetical) sub-themes of relationships, challenge, and voice.  Although the participants depicted in the study came from different families and backgrounds and offered different educational experiences, similarities emerged which communicated the essence of their shared experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The students involved in this study had, at one time, been placed on gifted academic probation. In sharing their experiences, these students provided a clear voice for why certain gifted learners may become disengaged as well as the factors that could lead to their re-engagement. Relationships emerged as a sub-theme in this study. Based on the findings, negative relationships contributed to student disengagement whereas positive relationships aided in student reengagement. Furthermore, challenge was an important sub-theme impacting engagement. When the students in this study were disengaged, they shared a lack of rigor or insurmountable challenge, which impacted their achievement. However, when they were appropriately challenged, these gifted learners became re-engaged. Having a voice, and having their voice heard, were highly valued by these gifted learners. Student Voice refers to the active involvement of students who are able to make decisions regarding potential areas of study, products produced, and collaborative efforts on their educational journey (Rogers, 2005). When they lacked a voice in their own educational journey, they became disengaged. Allowing them to have a choice in the type of work or projects produced as well as a voice in collaboration, aided in the re-engagement of these learners.

Parental relationships for each of the student participants served as a foundation and support for learning with students sharing the close bond they shared with at least one parent. In addition, parents placed a high priority on involvement in their child's life. Research suggests that a lack of parental support leads to underachievement (Montgomery, 2009). However, the findings for this study did not indicate this to be true. While the findings do not suggest that parental relationships contributed to disengagement, the findings do indicate strong parental support as a factor contributing to the re-engagement of these students. Even teachers suggested parental involvement was a major factor in student motivation and achievement.

Teacher relationships, both positive and negative, had a profound impact on student participants.  According to Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, and Choi (2011) "keys to student motivation, learning, and engagement" (p. 112) include supportive student/teacher relationships (Gentry et al., 2011; Patrick, Alderman, Ryan, Edelin, & Midgley, 2001; Siegel, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010). Both student and parent participants acknowledged the importance of teacher relationships in engagement and achievement of students. Furthermore, student and parent participants acknowledged and discussed the impact of negative teacher relationships on the student's disengagement and subsequent academic probation. For example, Mrs. Allen shared,

> Last year [Andrew] had a teacher who he felt like favored the girls tremendously. At the end of the year, he did not give 100% in the class, but he did not care because he felt like she had an attitude towards the boys…He did not respect her since he did not feel respected by her; therefore, he did not give his best.

In addition, each student participant highlighted a positive teacher relationship. For example, Finley shared, "Overall, my eighth grade teachers took an interest in seeing me exceed, which made me want to do better."  In addition, their parents highlighted the same positive teacher relationship as an important, positive impact in their child's life. For example, Mrs. Allen, Andrew's mother, noted that Andrew is more motivated "when he feels inspired and encouraged by his teacher." The findings of this study regarding positive student-teacher relationships appear to corroborate previous research. A major reason all seven students re-engaged was due to all of them connecting with a new teacher; thus, giving them a new positive relationship, a new outlook, and new opportunities. Interestingly, teachers identified parents as

an integral part of a child's academic success, but no teacher participant acknowledged his or her own impact on a child's achievement.

Student participants identified peer relationships as an essential component in either their disengagement or re-engagement. All student participants discussed negative peer relationships, which contributed to their disengagement. For example, Finley shared about her struggles with being bullied and the negative impact it had on her engagement and achievement. Finley admitted, "I couldn't focus. I always thought about when is the next time this person is going to do something." Mrs. Fuller shared that Finley's grades went from straight A's to C's and F's. Added to the impact of the bullying, Finley was also diagnosed with Autism. Mrs. Fuller stated, "She was socially awkward and didn't have the motivation and encouragement from peers."

Parents and students acknowledged the importance of surrounding themselves with positive peer relationships that offered encouragement and spurring one another on to succeed. Brittany stated, "If I see people who are excelling and doing well then it helps me. If I see people that are acting up and doing poorly on tests, it doesn't help me." Mrs. Barrett shared, "Brittany drew the connection that it mattered who she was with in classes, as she did better when she was with friends who pushed her to do her best work." David, who acknowledged being shy, noted, "I prefer being around my friends. They are like me and understand me, so they can help me."

Another sub-theme that emerged from the data was the desire for students to be challenged and their frustration when challenge was lacking or insurmountable. Both parents and students spoke openly about desiring academic challenge as well as the frustration when rigor was not present. Students suggested there was a need for challenge, but acknowledged there was a point when the challenge was insurmountable. For example, Gabbie shared, "I like to be challenged and really problem solve to find a solution. However, if it's too challenging or seems

impossible, I tend to shut down and feel insecure about my ability." Similarly, Brittany voiced, "[Being challenged] is important to me. Something that is challenging but not going to keep me up until 4 am and make it too hard for me. But hard enough that I am learning."

Finally, for the middle school gifted students in this study, having a voice, or choice, in their educational journey was vital to their engagement, or re-engagement. All seven students were eager to share their thoughts in the interview because it provided a stage for their voice to be heard. Even several teachers acknowledged that students desired the chance to take charge of their learning and demonstrate their creativity. Students shared how both choice in work and choice in collaboration impacted their re-engagement and academic achievement.

Students were very vocal regarding the importance of having the opportunity to express their choice in the type of work or products completed. Most students shared a lack of motivation, or even disengagement, for assignments that they were required to complete yet had no voice in the final product. For example, Eric admits, "When I'm not really interested in something, I don't do a great job. I tend to procrastinate and do just enough to get a passing grade." However, Mrs. Edwards, Eric's mother, shared, "When Eric wants to do something, he doesn't just do the minimum requirement, he does the minimum requirement plus this over here and this over there and tries to figure out what else he can do." Another participant, Chris, admitted, "When I am interested in a topic or project, I am going to work harder especially if I can work with my friends."

All seven students acknowledged that collaborating with peers was important to their learning experience. Six of the seven desired to have a choice in deciding on a partner or group. Brittany was very vocal on collaboration with peers. She stated, "I prefer it when I choose because I know who I'll work well with and who I'll slack off with." David acknowledged,

"Teachers need to incorporate group work…I tend to be more motivated when I am not working alone." One student, Finley, voiced the desire for the teacher to choose her partner. Finley admitted this choice was influenced by her Autism diagnosis and her experience from being bullied.

In summary, findings from this study shifted the focus from middle school gifted students' lack of inspiration to engagement of these learners. Two themes were revealed. The first theme—Gifted Learners Experience Disengagement—included three sub-themes: negative relationships; lack of challenge or insurmountable challenge; and no voice in work or collaboration. The second theme—Gifted Learners Experience Re-engagement—included three similar, but antithetical, sub-themes: positive relationships; appropriately challenged; and voice in collaboration and work. Each of these themes and sub-themes reflect the essence of the middle school gifted students' experience regarding engagement and achievement.

### Discussion

Findings from this transcendental phenomenological study altered the focus of this study. The findings affirmed that there were factors that affected the both the disengagement and the re-engagement of gifted middle school learners.

Since the students in this study were on academic gifted probation, or had previously been on probation, their parents and teachers viewed their lack of achievement as underachievement. Researchers suggest there are contributing factors to underachievement (McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Montgomery, 2009; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Siegle, Rubenstien, & Mitchell, 2014). More specifically, Montgomery (2009) argues that one of the external factors affecting underachievement of gifted students were home environments that fail to provide the needed familial support. Based on the findings of this study, this was not the case for these gifted

middle school students. In fact, all seven students described a close relationship with at least one of their parents. Six of the seven students even identified one parent as their role model. However, the close relationship with their parents did contribute to the re-engagement of these learners.

Both teacher and peer relationships were both contributing factors of academic engagement. When the teacher-student and student-peer relationship was negative, these learners became disengaged eventually leading to academic probation. However, when these relationships were positive, these same learners shared experiences of re-engagement. Meaningful relationships with teachers and gifted student success are not only supported by the literature (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, Choi, 2011; Siegle, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010), but also by the findings of this study.

Challenge, or rigor, refers to the stretching of one's cognitive ability to allow growth and learning to take place. Research indicates that a rigorous and challenging curriculum is needed in order to engage gifted learners (Gentry et al., 2011; Kaplan, 2009; Little, 2012; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Siegle et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 1995; VanTassel-Baska, 2005; 2011; 2012; Watters, 2010). Both parents and students spoke openly about desiring academic challenge as well as frustration when the rigor was not present. According to Vygotsky (1978), in order for learning to take place, instruction must take place in the student's Zone of Proximal Development. Education must lead to development (Vygotsky, 1978; Kravtsova, 2009), and if instruction never takes place in a student's ZPD, development will not happen. Andrew shared his frustration with teachers providing instruction for previously mastered content. He stated,

I don't like how sometimes, if you have already learned stuff from earlier in the year, when teachers go back over it as if they think you have never learned it before…I like to learn new things. I don't like having to "learn" things that we already know and have to go over.

According to Mooij (1999), often a "gifted child is not doing well because he or she may be forced to underachieve" (p. 63). Education should enable each child to reach his or her potential cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally (Bruner, 1971; Mooij, 1999); however, student participants and one parent shared their frustrations with the lack of challenge or rigor provided to middle school gifted learners. Brittany shared, "[I like] being challenged…because I like teachers who do things that will stimulate you and kind of get you to learn and get you to become better." Mrs. Barrett, Brittany's mother, expressed her frustration with the lack of challenge from Brittany's science and social studies classes: "In middle school, [Brittany's] science and social studies classes are collaborative, with gifted children mixed with some lower achieving students…I believe that she has not been challenged in the same way in these two classes." Findings from this study corroborate other studies that reflect the importance of a curriculum that is challenging and meets the needs of gifted learners.

Student and parent participants acknowledged that student voice and choice were an integral part of their motivation and inspiration to achieve. According to Powers (2008), teachers and students sharing responsibility for learning is "synergy for success that honors the talents and uniqueness of the individual while contributing to the whole" (p. 58). When students are able to voice what they want to learn, they take responsibility for their learning. In order for gifted learners to develop learner autonomy, teachers must connect classroom standards and curriculum with student's voice and choice (Garn & Jolly, 2014; Gentry et al., 2011; Powers, 2008; Siegle et

al., 2014; Watters, 2010). Even though learning remains individual (Burner, 1971), incorporating collaborative opportunities with an emphasis on real-world connections is imperative (Klimis & VanTassel-Baska, 2013). All the student participants shared the importance of collaborating with peers. Furthermore, participants acknowledged the desire to connect curriculum to real-world scenarios. For example, David shared his preference for math problems based on real-world situations. These findings of this study corroborate the findings of earlier research.

## Implications

While the purpose of this study was to understand how middle school students, their parents, and teachers described the lack of inspiration to achieve, based on the collected data, the focus shifted from inspiration to engagement. This study was designed to give a voice to a population that has been relatively lacking in the literature. The gifted middle school students who participated in the study were able to give voice to factors that are important to them regarding education and learning. Their stories revealed findings that are aligned with the theoretical framework of this study and that are helpful for parents and educators.

### Parents

One sub-theme that emerged from this study pertains to relationships, particularly to the parental relationship. Even though the student participants in this study had a close relationship with their parents, participants still identified it as an important relationship. Six of the seven student participants identified a parent as a role model and served as an inspiration to them. Each parent-child relationship entailed a connection not associated with education whether it was sports, church, or simple family time. The balance between academic and non-academic support provided a sanctuary of support for each student. Even though this sanctuary of support provided the stability the students needed to be able to become re-engaged academically, it is

recommended that parents advocate for appropriately challenged curriculum. As the findings in this study indicate, positive and meaningful relationships with teachers are important. As such, parents need to maintain communication with teachers and partner with teachers in the education of their child. In addition, parents need to maintain open lines of communication with their children. This may enable a child, who is struggling with disengagement, to give voice to their frustrations, which could begin a process of re-engagement.

**Educators**

Educators are always faced with both disengaged and engaged students on a daily basis. All three sub-themes that emerged—relationships, challenge, and voice—are closely connected to teachers. It is imperative that teachers recognize the impact their day-to-day interactions with students have on each student. While each student participant excitedly shared his or her story about a teacher, or teachers, who had positively impacted their re-engagement, there was also an account of how each student was negatively impacted by a student-teacher relationship originally leading to disengagement. Educators need to take note that students can recognize when teachers are not caring. Research supports that supportive student/teacher relationships impact engagement and achievement (Gentry et al., 2011; Patrick, Alderman, Ryan, Edelin, & Midgley, 2001; Siegel, Rubenstein, & Mitchell, 2014; Watters, 2010). Furthermore, previous research (Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010) as well as the findings of this study indicated teachers connecting and fostering positive relationships with students led to increased motivation for students. While an educator may not recognize the value of one-on-one interactions with students, the students place a high value on it. As such, educators should listen to the collective voice of these middle school students.

Developing a positive and meaningful relationship with students is essential to the engagement of gifted students. This can be achieved in numerous ways. An easy first step is connecting with a student individually with a simple hello or a quick discussion about the latest movie or T.V. show middle school students watch. Publically acknowleding a student's work with praise or sending a positive email to a parent has a greater, positive impact than teachers realize. Gifted students perceive a supportive environment when teachers demonstrate that they care whether it is through personalization of practice problems, use of humor, playing music, or attendance at sporting events (Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, Choi, 2011; Siegle et al., 2014; Watters, 2010). Ultimately, gifted middle school students want to know how much a teacher cares, then they will care about the knowledge the teacher has to share. It is vital that teachers understand that teaching is more than teaching content, it is teaching students who need and desire meaningful relationships with their teachers.

Additionally, students in this study desired challenge and desire to have a voice in their educational journey. The middle school gifted students in this study wanted to have their minds engaged in critical thinking and problem solving with opportunities for creativity to flourish. With this in mind, educators are encouraged to meet the needs of individual gifted learners by providing instruction that stretches their cognitive processes (Bruner, 1971). This will require teachers of gifted learners to teach beyond the required standards and develop learning tasks that lead to mastery at higher cognitive levels. In addition, educators should create a partnership of learning with students, which could lead to a sense of self-efficacy and learner empowerment (Powers, 2008; Scigliano & Hipsky, 2010). Gifted middle school learners desire to have a voice in their learning. For example, when assigning tasks to be completed by students, give them the opportunity and freedom to develop their own task. Instead of requiring a traditional research

paper, allow a student to create a podcast or a documentary. In order to truly partner with gifted

middle school students, teachers have to be willing to listen and give up some control in order to

achieve engagement. By allowing students to truly partner in their educational journey, not only

is their voice being heard but a positive, meaningful relationship with the teacher will develop

and strengthen. Finally, educators need to avoid the silent classroom and embrace the

collaborative chaos of student interaction and learning.

**Administrators of Gifted Programs**

With the research revealing the importance of voice, appropriate levels of challenge, and

positive relationships as integral forces in the engagement and achievement of gifted learners,

administrators of gifted programs can incorporate these factors in the evaluation of gifted

programs. Providing professional learning for educators in these areas will aid in the successful

implementation of gifted programs. It is important for teachers to not only understand these areas

but also practical ways to improve these areas in their own classroom.  Additionally, as gifted

learners become so disengaged as to require academic probation, steps should be taken in these

specific areas to assist in the reengagement of these learners.

<div align="center">

**Limitations**

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As with all research, there were limitations in this transcendental phenomenology study.

Since the state of Georgia allows each local board of education to determine continuation policy,

Sunnydale School District's definition of probation is a limitation. This probation designation

does not address the other possible gifted learners who are disengaged but meet the minimum

requirement. The interview process asked participants to reflect on educational experiences from

the past and present; there is the possibility that some experiences were not remembered

accurately. At times, the student participants needed clarification regarding questions, which

could have led to a variation in responses. Teacher interviews did not provide the same insight and depth as the student and parent interviews. There could be several reasons for this. One possibility is self-preservation—not wanting to acknowledge any perceived wrongdoing that could hurt their job. Another possibility is maintaining a positive spin—not a single teacher spoke negatively about their school or teaching practices used within the school. This could limit the findings as well.  Despite bracketing my own experiences, my expertise as an educator of gifted students could have shaped my understandings of the findings. Lastly, limited transferability is also an issue. All participants resided in the same school district, thus excluding participants from surrounding school districts that may have had different experiences. While this study included 19 participants, seven of the participants determined the remaining participants. Although I sought diversity among the participants, only Caucasian students and one Asian student were identified based on the criterion. Only Caucasian students participated in the study with stories unique to them. Positive parental support was also a limitation. All seven students were from middle-class, suburban homes with a strong support system. As such, transferring findings from these participants' stories to other participants in other settings may be difficult.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Although a lot of research focusing on gifted education, particularly at the elementary and high school levels, exists, a gap still exists focusing on the middle school gifted student voice regarding disengagement and re-engagement. Future research in the area of disengagement and re-engagement as it pertains to middle school gifted students will provide further insight into a population that has been overlooked. Future research should include a case study focused on gifted disengaged middle school learners.

While this study yielded valuable findings into why certain middle school gifted students are disengaged and how they become re-engaged, additional research should be completed in this area with participants of diverse demographics. Diversification of the participants could help to create a more complete picture of the factors contributing to the disengagement and re-engagement of middle school gifted students. In addition, a similar study should be conducted in an urban, inner-city school in order to identify any additional factors affecting engagement of learners. Also, future research needs to examine the teachers' perspective regarding gifted middle school students disengagement and re-engagement.

Even though the students in this study experienced disengagement resulting in academic probation, they also experienced re-engagement. However, there are gifted middle school students who remain disengaged and on probation. Future studies are needed to understand why these students do not experience re-engagement.

Additionally, it is recommended that future research studies focus on more narrow populations of middle school gifted students. For example, a study focusing on the factors affecting the engagement of low socioeconomic middle school gifted students. Furthermore, research that focuses on each gender specifically could yield themes unique to each gender.

**Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how gifted middle school students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve. The data collected shifted the focus from inspiration, an emotion or feeling, to engagement. This study, focused on the stories and voices of gifted middle school students, was necessary in helping to fill a gap in literature in which gifted middle school students have been neglected. To investigate this gap in the literature, four research questions were asked: How do middle school gifted students describe

the terms *inspired* and *motivation*?  How do gifted middle school students, their parents, and their teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve?  What factors do participants identify as influencing their lack of inspiration to achieve? What impact does the lack of inspiration to achieve have on gifted middle school students' academic experiences and achievements? To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation of data collection was used. The four data collection methods used were student questionnaires, student interviews, parent interviews, and teacher interviews. Data was gathered from seven students who were or had been on gifted probation in middle school, seven parents, and five teachers from a northeast Georgia school district. Analysis of the collected data using Phenomenological Reduction led to the emergence of two themes. Those two themes were: (a) Gifted Learners Experience Disengagement and  (b) Gifted Learners Experience Re-engagement.  These themes were divided into three similar, but somewhat antithetical sub-themes: (a) relationships; (b) challenge; and (c) voice.

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# APPENDICES

Appendix A: Excerpt From Reflective Journal

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter

Appendix C: Superintendent Approval Letter

Appendix D: Recruitment Letter

Appendix E: Student Informed Consent

Appendix F: Parent Informed Consent

Appendix G: Teacher Informed Consent

Appendix A: Excerpts of Reflective Journal

As the parent of a gifted child & a teacher of gifted students, I have ~~made~~ a number of assumptions regarding why gifted middle school students are uninspired.

Assumptions:

- Involved parents & supportive parents = motivated & inspired students
- a lack of parent involvement/support results in students who are unmotivated & uninspired
- the use technology will have an impact on motivation & inspiration of middle ~~school~~ school students
- Middle school students want to be heard; if they feel ignored, they will shut down
- If the teacher is more of a ~~facilitator~~ facilitator with more student-directed learning, then students will be engaged → more motivated & inspired.
- If the classroom is more teacher directed with powerpoints/lecture, students will be disengaged & uninspired
- If students don't see the value or relevance in the learning, they will not engage w/the material. Leads to lack of motivation

"Finley"
- Just completed her 8th grade year
- diagnosed with Autism (Asperger's) in 7th grade
  ↳ Assumption: social awkwardness due to Autism will affect student interaction. + ultimately motivation + inspiration
- very emotional when discussing bullying she experienced (4th/5th to 7th)
  ↳ first time I have experienced a encountered a gifted student who openly shared about being bullied.
    ↳ my initial thoughts: this will be the major obstacle to her achievement.
- this student seemed to describe 2 unique experiences at the same school
  ① 6th/7th grade: "bullying" years; lots of tears + definitely frustration + anger toward teachers + students involved
  ② 8th grade: 4 new teachers to building/school; she smiled; appears happy
* Collaboration w/ student w/ anxiety was positive → she smiled while sharing *

Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

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## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 9, 2014

Nicole Baker
IRB Approval 1996.120914: Uninspired, Gifted, Middle School Students: A
Phenomenological Study

Dear Nicole,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the
Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided
above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you
make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit
an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to
your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your
research project.

Sincerely,
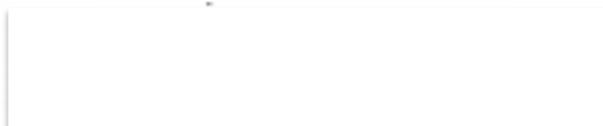
**Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.**
*Professor, IRB Chair*
**Counseling**

**(434) 592-4054**

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Appendix C: Superintendent Approval Letter

October 28, 2014

Nichole Baker
120 Greystone Terrace
Athens, GA 30606

Dear Ms. Baker,

I am delighted to offer this letter of support for your action research project, *Uninspired Gifted Middle School Students: A Phenomenological Study,* and hereby give you permission to conduct this research in the ▮▮▮ County School System contingent on Liberty University's IRB approval.

I understand that all required protocols regarding human subject research and informed consent will be followed. I am approving the research with the understanding that the principal, teachers, and students are in no way obligated to participate because of my approval. This looks like a very interesting project and I look forward to receiving information regarding the findings of this research project.

All the best,

Dr. Chris McMichael
Superintendent
▮▮▮ County School System

Appendix D: Recruitment Letter

Dear Parent's Name:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate in Education. The purpose of my research is to examine how middle school gifted students define motivation and inspiration, how middle school gifted students, their parents, and teachers describe their academic experiences as well as factors that impact students' inspiration to achieve. The study will compare the stories of individuals with similar backgrounds to compare and contrast them. I am writing to invite you and your child to participate in my study.

If you are a parent of a middle school, gifted student who has been on gifted probation, are willing to participate, and are willing to allow your child to participate, you will be asked to complete an interview. It should take approximately one hour for you to complete the procedure listed. Your and your child's participation will be completely confidential, and any personal, identifying information will be protected with a pseudonym.

For you and your child to participate, contact me to schedule an interview. You may email me at snbaker@liberty.edu, or call me at 706-296-9216.

A consent document attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Shanna Nicole Baker

Appendix E: Institutional Review Board Student Assent Form

**Assent of Child to Participate in a Research Study**

**What is the name of the study and who is doing the study?**
UNINSPIRED GIFTED MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL
STUDY
Shanna Nicole Baker

**Why are we doing this study?**
We are interested in studying how middle school gifted students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve.

**Why are we asking you to be in this study?**
You are being asked to be in this research study because you have been placed on gifted probation at some point during middle school. We want to give you the chance to voice why you are (or seem to be) uninspired.

**If you agree, what will happen?**
If you are in this study, you will complete a short questionnaire, which will take 15-20 minutes. In addition, we will interview you so that you will be able to discuss your experiences. The interview will last approximately one hour.

**Do you have to be in this study?**
No, you do not have to be in this study. If you want to be in this study, then tell the researcher. If you don't want to, it's OK to say no. The researcher will not be angry. You can say yes now and change your mind later. It's up to you.

**Do you have any questions?**
You can ask questions any time. You can ask now. You can ask later. You can talk to the researcher. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher to explain it to you again.

Signing your name below means that you want to be in the study.

_____          _____

Signature of Child                                           Date


Nicole Baker
Email: snbaker@liberty.edu
Dr. Fred Milacci
Email: fmilacci@liberty.edu
Liberty University Institutional Review Board,
1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515
or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Appendix F: Institutional Review Board Parent Consent Form

**INFORMED CONSENT**
Uninspired Gifted Middle School Students: A Phenomenological Study
Principal Investigator: Shanna Nicole Baker
Liberty University
Education Department

You are invited to be in a research study of how middle school gifted students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a parent of a middle school, gifted student. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Shanna Nicole Baker, a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at Liberty University is conducting this study.

**Background Information:**
The purpose of this study is to examine how middle school gifted students define motivation and inspiration, how middle school gifted students, their parents, and teachers describe their academic experiences as well as factors that impact students' inspiration to achieve. The study will compare the stories of individuals with similar backgrounds to compare and contrast them.

**Procedures:**
If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed once on audiotape to respond to open-ended questions about your child's educational experiences. The interview should take approximately one hour. In addition, your permission is requested to include your child in the interview process as well. Your child will be interviewed twice: once in writing to focus on different aspects of motivation and inspiration and once on audiotape to respond to open-ended questions about his or her educational experiences.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**
The study has several risks, none of which involve anything beyond what you would experience in everyday life. First, although your name and identity will be completely hidden, there is the possibility that despite all precautions taken and pseudonyms used, someone reading the final product may recognize the details of your story. Second, you may feel the exploration of the phenomenon exposes emotional feelings.

Participants will not receive a direct benefit. Your story may help educational leaders understand the phenomenon better and may help them take appropriate action for other middle school gifted students.

**Compensation:**
You will not receive payment for your participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be

stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. The records of this study will be kept confidential. In the final presentation of this study, no information included will make it evident that you were one of the participants. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your and your child's identities. The code sheet linking your personal identity with your data will be securely kept in a locked file separated from all other data. Research records in print format will be stored securely in locked file cabinets or in data files with password protection. Only Shanna Nicole Baker and her advisor, Dr. Fred Milacci, will have access to the audio files. Audio recordings of interviews will be transcribed word for word, securely kept in a locked file, and be destroyed three years after the end of the study.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**
Participants may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. If a participant withdraws from the study, the audio recordings of their interview will be deleted.

**Contacts and Questions:**
The researcher conducting this study is Shanna Nicole Baker. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 706-296-9216 or snbaker@liberty.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact Dr. Fred Milacci at (434) 582-2445 or fmilacci@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.
***Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.***

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of parent or guardian: _____Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____Date: _____
**IRB Code Numbers:** 1996.120914

Appendix G: Institutional Review Board Teacher Consent Form

**INFORMED CONSENT**
UNINSPIRED GIFTED MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL
STUDY
Principal Investigator: Shanna Nicole Baker
Liberty University
Education Department

You are invited to be in a research study of how middle school gifted students, their parents, and teachers describe the lack of inspiration to achieve. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a teacher of gifted students. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Shanna Nicole Baker, a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at Liberty University is conducting this study.

**Background Information:**
The purpose of this study is to examine how middle school gifted students define motivation and inspiration, how middle school gifted students, their parents, and teachers describe their academic experiences as well as factors that impact students' inspiration to achieve. The study will compare the stories of individuals with similar backgrounds to compare and contrast them.

**Procedures:**
If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed once on audiotape to respond to open-ended questions about your educational experiences. The interview should take approximately one hour.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**
The study has several risks, none of which involve anything beyond what you would experience in everyday life. First, although your name and identity will be completely hidden, there is the possibility that despite all precautions taken and pseudonyms used, someone reading the final product may recognize the details of your story. Second, you may feel the exploration of the phenomenon exposes emotional feelings.

Participants will not receive a direct benefit from participating in this study. Your story may help educational leaders understand the phenomenon better and may help them take appropriate action for other middle school, gifted students.

**Compensation:**
You will not receive payment for your participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. The records of this study

will be kept confidential. In the final presentation of this study, no information included will make it evident that you were one of the participants. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. The code sheet linking your personal identity with your data will be securely kept in a locked file separated from all other data. Research records in print format will be stored securely in locked file cabinets or in data files with password protection. Only Shanna Nicole Baker and her advisor, Dr. Fred Milacci, will have access to the audio files. Audio recordings of interviews will be transcribed word for word, securely kept in a locked file, and destroyed three years after the end of the study.

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If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.
***Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.***

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.


☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of teacher: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____Date: _____

**IRB Code Numbers:** 1996.120914