Understanding Giftedness and Underachievement: At the Edge of Possibility

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ABSTRACT

Although many ways of doing research exist in education, much of the research conducted has focused on identifying or defining strategies to fit learners to existing theories of education and schooling. This article examines historical styles of research conducted around the construct of gifted underachievement. It then explores possibilities of implementing alternative approaches and theoretical arguments in practical applications in this area. Goals include providing an overview of research focused on gifted underachievement, examining research positions (paradigms) that more vividly represent complexity inherent in educating gifted individuals, and providing precepts that guide practitioners and scholars to alternative views of the research process and use of research outcomes.

Several perspectives guiding educational research design have been addressed in the scholarly literature (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995; Short, 1991; Shulman, 1986). These have led to thoughtful discussion of methodological approaches in gifted child education (e.g., Ambrose, 1998; Borland, 1990; Coleman, Sanders, & Cross, 1997), but broad explorations incorporating these perspectives have only recently been conducted.

This article takes these thoughtful, but mostly theoretical, arguments to one phenomenon of gifted child education—gifted underachievement—to engage readers in a practical application of theory and diverse approaches to research. The discussion is a forthright attempt to offer practitioners and scholars insight regarding practical applications of divergent strands of thinking in teaching and learning situations. The goals are to conduct a broad overview of the research focused on gifted underachievement; to briefly examine existing research positions (paradigms) in light of complex interactions of space and place guiding teaching and learning; and to provide perceptual conversation and new understandings for practitioners and scholars regarding the life experiences of those persons involved in the classroom milieu through a qualitative research scheme, which has only fleetingly existed in the historical literature associated with gifted child education.

There exist 15 definitions of underachievement in the scholarly literature (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982). These diverse definitions make problematic clear acceptance of tendencies and behaviors associated with the construct. For all intents and purposes, underachievement is in the eye of the beholder, much to the chagrin of gifted child education scholars, teachers, and students bearing the label. The inability of the field to delineate an acceptable and supported definition for underachievement supports the notion that this

PUTTING THE RESEARCH TO USE

In educational research, an underlying focus remains on identifying or defining strategies to fit learners to existing theories of education and schooling. In most instances, research is done on the researched, rather than with them. Grounding theoretical arguments within a distinct area of gifted child education offers opportunities to discuss insights and actions, connecting theory and practice. This article explores the construct of gifted underachievement as a place where current discussions about broad methodological research approaches are put into action. Through an historical overview of the literature associated with gifted underachievement and an examination of the philosophical underpinnings of the research base presenting possibilities beyond the process-product approach that permeates historical and current research design, broader, deeper, and, most importantly, different understandings about underachievement of the gifted are possible. Scholars, researchers, and practitioners should be made aware of alternate research designs, methods, and styles that can have an impact on current understanding of gifted underachievement.
phenomenon is not understood. Therefore, exploring historical approaches that have been used to learn about underachievement can guide future efforts to expand awareness leading to a broader conceptualization of the construct.

The following section presents a sociohistorical timeline and account of gifted underachievement as it exists in the scholarly literature. Contextually, the goal is to provide an outline for the reader unfamiliar with research focusing on underachievement of the gifted. A broad view of events and actions offers baseline information, rather than full discourse analysis, about causality or complexity of the human condition.

Gifted Underachievement in the Literature

From the late 1800s to the 1930s, research studies and statements focused on identifying and diagnosing maladies in gifted individuals. Positivist philosophy was the driving force behind research and theoretical design, with results framed in a process-product—cause and effect—structure. From this positivist position, understanding meant atomizing experiences and measuring observable events. This philosophy of breaking down and measuring—or quantifying—followed the doctrines of natural science. Traditional positivist design drove studies on the gifted conducted by Terman beginning in 1921 and Hollingworth in the 1930s (Hollingworth, 1942; Tannenbaum, 1983; Terman & Oden, 1947).

Behavioral Psychology

It was not until the development of behavioral psychology in the 1930s and 1940s that underachievement of the gifted began to appear in the explorations of educational and psychological researchers (Ormrod, 1990). A subtle shift began as individual personality characteristics replaced exercising of the brain muscle (faculty psychology) as a unifying axiom in teaching and learning.

The intrigue generated by the descriptions within Terman and Oden’s (1947) publication regarding the inability of subjects to reach their expected ability levels offered opportunities for behaviorists to apply their theories and procedures. Surely the personality characteristics of Terman’s underachievers were the root cause of their lack of achievement, and behavioral psychologists could solve this dilemma.

Much of what we know about gifted underachievement is grounded in research conducted in the 1950s and 1960s following the standards of process-product design. Emphasis focused on identifying student deficiencies that could be corrected. Recommendations involved treating these deficiencies, rather than examining complex interactions occurring in the classroom and home lives of students.

Studies in the early behaviorism period were generally comparative in nature. Behavioral researchers compared groups of gifted achievers, gifted nonachievers, normal achievers, and normal nonachievers to gather foundational evidence regarding differences between these groups of individuals (Gowan, 1957; Kimball, 1953; Kurtz & Swenson, 1951; Morgan, 1952; Passow & Goldberg, 1958; Rust & Ryan, 1953).

These representative studies used quantitative research designs with one exception: Kimball’s (1953) work used a qualitative design aimed at gathering phenomenological data about underachievement tendencies. In the end, the data were quantified for comparative purposes—probably to earn publication. Through the literature up to 1980, Kimball’s study was the only published example of a qualitative approach to examining underachievement from the perspective of labeled participants through open-ended responses to questions.

A Shot Into Space

With the national fervor brought about by the Sputnik I launch and subsequent federal funding for education, research on the gifted was thrust into prominence as a solution to a national crisis in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Gifted individuals were going to rise to the top and help the United States regain her leadership position on the world’s scientific and technological playing fields (Tannenbaum, 1983).

Research foci were wide and varied, but remained essentially diagnostic when gifted underachievement was examined. Behavioral psychology guided research design, and areas such as motivation, frustration, family relations, home backgrounds, mental health, and personality differences drove inquiry (Bachtold, 1969; Baymur & Patterson, 1960; Dunn, 1963; Durr & Collier, 1960; Gallagher & Rogge, 1966; Karnes, McCoy, Zehrbach, Wollersheim, & Clarizio, 1963; Mc Gillivray, 1964; Morrow & Wilson, 1961; Perkins, 1965, 1969; Pierce & Bowman, 1960, pp. 33–66; Purkey, 1969; Raph, Goldberg, & Passow, 1966; Shaw & Black, 1960; Shaw & McCuen, 1960; Shouksmith & Taylor, 1964; Tetrault, 1965).

Yet, gifted underachievement remained a mystery. Research studies contributed knowledge about how gifted
underachievers varied, but little concerted effort was put forth in the attempt to replicate findings of others. Education in general was at the forefront of public concern. There was much to be learned, but depth in the gifted underachievement knowledge base would have to wait for another time. That “other time” did not arrive, and society’s focus began to shift.

**Shifting to Social Concerns**

Precipitation of the field of sociology brought a redirected emphasis on research design and researcher thinking. Philosophical undercurrents guided analysis of data from the point of view of the experiences that subjects had during a study and away from the external process-product mode of research analysis (Shulman, 1986). A broad shift in social philosophy was occurring. Implications and recommendations began to criticize the existing state of affairs in education—and, in general, society’s marriage to academics and intellectualism waned (Blumer, 1969).

There was growing outrage at the examples documented through the media of inhumane treatment of handicapped students in schools. These children were not being provided with adequate learning opportunities. Societal perceptions—stemming from the ideal that each person should be allowed to strive for personal dreams—generated pressure on the government to address inequities of opportunity.

Beginning with the Vocational Education Act in 1963 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, federal funding was made available and public laws were enacted to ensure equitable treatment of handicapped students (Alexander & Alexander, 1992). Changing social concerns meant that the gifted were no longer the focal point of research and federal funding. Efforts focused on identifying and solving the deficit needs of handicapped students.

A minimum performance and opportunity threshold provided a benchmark for societal tolerance in education. As long as students were offered educational opportunities with the intent of raising ability levels to approach average, educational endeavors earned social approval. The prevailing attitude was that the “top end” special education students—the gifted—would either “get it on their own” or at least could “hold their own” without the need to invest funds and resources in programming (Tannenbaum, 1983). Needs of the gifted underachiever, although intriguing to psychologists, were not a focal point for educational reformers.

**Monality and a New View.** Up to this point, the gifted were considered a resource to be mined. They would provide leadership for business communities and the country. Innovation, experimentation, and invention were essential to continued expansion of the U.S. economy and leadership in world affairs. Intellectual giftedness was necessary to these desirable outcomes, ensuring that a pool of leaders was available in all fields (Tannenbaum, 1983).

However, the support that U.S. society offered for this structured “intellect and leader mill” waned because of events occurring in the mid to late 1960s. The “whiz kids” who were groomed to lead the country precipitated U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict. They promised a quick victory in the name of democracy and embraced the advent of live television broadcasts of battlefield events as a technological breakthrough, bringing the “police action” into the living rooms of U.S. citizens (Tannenbaum, 1983). As the police action escalated and science was unable to help end the conflict quickly, societal perceptions began to change from support and pride to disillusionment and pessimism. No longer was science lauded as the answer to all problems. The same “whiz kids” who were supported for their prowess and leadership were now unable to solve a major social concern.

An era of anti-intellectualism was in progress. Gifted underachievers were left to scratch out their existence without an appreciable understanding of their predicament available in the literature (Gallagher & Rogge, 1966). Saving the whales and developing multicultural programs and brotherhood ushered in the decade of the 1970s (Bybee, 1993; DeBoer, 1991).

Sociology and behavioral psychology had been well established as viable means of studying the interactions that occurred in educational settings, with an emphasis on operant conditioning serving as the impetus for research design during the period (Woolfolk, 1987). Researchers speculated that underachievement of the gifted was curable through counseling and guidance, an hypothesis that was played out through a review of the available literature on gifted underachievement and studies tooled to test the contentions (Hojnacki, 1979; Jackson, Cleveland, & Merenda, 1975; O’Shea, 1970; Perkins & Wicas, 1971; Zilli, 1971; Ziv, Rimon, & Doni, 1977). It was thought that behavior modification and reinforcement through group and individual counseling could alleviate underachievement of the gifted (Zilli).

At the same time that Zilli (1971) was prescribing a psychological cure for underachievement of the gifted, U.S. Commissioner of Education, Sidney P. Marland was presenting a report to Congress regarding the education of the gifted and talented in schools across the U.S. The impetus for this congressional report was Public Law 91-
230 section 806, which mandated an evaluation of gifted and talented programs and funding in each state (Marland, 1971). Not surprisingly, in most states, because of an anti-intellectual focus, there existed a scarcity of programming for gifted and talented individuals.

Intellectualism Revisited. Dissemination of the Marland Report (Marland, 1971) findings and the social turnabout in intellectual thinking evoked a renewed interest in the education of the gifted and talented. However, few researchers were available with interests in underachievement of the gifted, and underachievers were able to remain hidden as a result of their resemblance to typical students or their ability to drop out.

It was not until Whitmore’s (1980) landmark study in Cupertino, California, from 1965 to 1970 that a longitudinal study provided recommendations and implications regarding assistance for the special needs of underachieving gifted students. Interactions of students, teachers, and the learning environment, which had not been addressed by prior researchers, were the focus of analysis. The intent was to provide a holistic description of the young underachieving gifted student and describe intervention strategies showing promise in reducing or eliminating the underachievement phenomenon.

Whitmore’s (1980) study provided a benchmark for change in research emphasis. A teacher working in the classroom with students to alleviate a problem replaced the visiting researcher model. Emphasis was placed on classroom ecology—where the educational environment was a major focus of the study—with the teacher serving a dual role as researcher (Shulman, 1986). This change was a form of teacher action research, in contrast to the common approach of researchers coming to the schools to conduct studies and then leaving for the “ivory tower” of the university to write up results.

Unfortunately, Whitmore’s (1980) seminal study on underachievement of young gifted individuals had limited impact on the field. The intent of her text was to prompt replication of the study in other areas in order to broaden the knowledge base about gifted underachievers and test the recommendations generated by her study (J. R. Whitmore, personal communication, April 9, 1997). That intent remains unrealized.

The 1980s and 1990s. In 1982, a national report on identification practices for gifted and talented individuals was published (Richert, Alvino, & McDonnel, 1982). This report noted the drastic lack of identification protocols for underachieving gifted students and, hence, their lack of inclusion in programs for the gifted and talented. It prompted a new wave of theoretical discussion about the needs of gifted underachievers, contentions about their plight, and existing knowledge from the literature (Compton, 1982; Delisle, 1982; Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Gonzalez & Hayes, 1988; Pirozzo, 1982; Rimm, 1988; Shoff, 1984; Swassing, 1985; Tannenbaum, 1983; Whitmore, 1984, 1986).

Few research studies, however, were added to the literature base to expand knowledge of and understanding about the gifted underachievement phenomenon during the decade of the 1980s. The studies that were conducted focused on the affective domain of knowing (Emerick, 1988; Golicz, 1982; Laffoon, Jenkins-Friedman, & Tollefson, 1989). Data were collected on attitudes and perceptions from gifted underachievers, and comparisons were made to achievers and “overachievers” in an attempt to ground the analysis and determine recommendations for additional study.

The decade of the 1990s held promise regarding advances in the field of gifted underachievement. The work of Shore, Cornell, Robinson, and Ward (1991) provided recommendations to researchers in an attempt to guide and develop a concerted research effort addressing the lack of understanding about gifted underachievers. To the present, however, there exist few studies in the literature attuned to gifted underachievement. These include qualitative theses by O’Grady (1995), Moore (1996), Keighley (1996), and Schultz (1999); an intervention piece by Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert (1995); and, a quantitative study by Baker, Bridger, and Evans (1998). An interesting aside is that three of these studies (Keighley; Moore; Schultz) approached the underachievement phenomenon from the perspective of the student—the underachiever—rather than from the perspective of the underachiever needing to be fixed, or rehabilitated in some manner.

Keighley (1996) examined the issue of student boredom based on the experiences and environments in which the students spent their time in school. This descriptive design focused intervention strategies on the school environment, rather than on a deficit in the student causing nonconformance to the educational setting. Moore (1996) used a case-study design to describe the life experiences of three gifted high school underachievers. This interpretive design, while breaking new ground in methodology applied to research in the gifted education field, provided support to findings from previous research studies. Schultz (1999) used a phenomenological approach to explore the life experiences of underachieving gifted students identified through peer nomination and other criteria. Students at the secondary level shared insights about their experiences in school and provided advice to teachers for educating others like them.
Glancing Back, Thinking Ahead

The plight of the gifted underachiever remains largely a mystery, and the span of research that exists in the literature generates little depth of understanding regarding this population. The available research studies offer conflicting results of little worth in understanding and developing intervention strategies (Gallagher & Rogge, 1966). Underachievement is a complex issue involving social interactions, perceptions, and expectations that remain unexplored and would best be thought of in a multidimensional way (Krouse & Krouse, 1981).

Broad examination of this group of students may be undertaken best by exploring underachievement through the experiences, expectations, and perceptions of those individuals bearing the label. Whether the label is attached using any of the 15 documented definitions (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982) or based on another protocol such as motivation theory or self-efficacy is insignificant. External interpretation of observed actions and events is purely speculative. Furthering this research perspective (e.g., Reis & McCoach, 2000) is sure to perpetuate the lack of understanding inherent in the research base (Gallagher & Rogge, 1966). The life experiences of the gifted underachiever can only be realized and understood through their own words in concert with existing knowledge. This approach gathers information that can be useful in exploring the historical literature base in light of students’ educational lived experiences (van Manen, 1990).

This focus does not exist in the literature base and requires broader philosophical research perspectives. As Albert Einstein once commented, “The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them” (Quotations/zitate, n.d.). The goal is to describe the underpinnings of various scholarly perspectives. The mission is not to subjugate the historical record in an effort to promote the claims of postmodern or any other discourse. All research positions contribute to depth of knowledge and must be included to develop holistic understanding.

So why bother ourselves with concerns about the philosophy underpinning research designs? I contend that, until we expand how we go about learning about the world, we will always be limiting the knowledge base in a way that reflects what is comfortable, familiar, and relatively easy to us, not what sheds the most light on, offers new ideas about, or expands access to children (Cross, 1994, p. 285).

The following section provides a descriptive philosophical grounding for approaches to research. These lead to a typology of research approaches exploring qualitative designs in the final section of this article. The discussion provides guided possibilities that can be used in the future to explore gifted underachievement from multiple perspectives.

Philosophies Behind Research Approaches

Philosophy and personal truth claims undergird the position a researcher takes when conducting an inquiry into phenomena. There are no right or wrong choices, only decisions based on questions being considered (Glesne, 1999; Patton, 1990). It is rare that a researcher is able to follow the proposed research guidelines exactly. The complexity of the field setting engages the researcher in a continual process of self-reflexivity and decision making (Denzin, 1997; Glesne; Merriam, 1998; Mills, 2000; Patton; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). The observer can gain heuristic understanding—the goal of the research—through this process of attending to the field setting’s complexity (and often seemingly chaotic actions).

The thinking patterns of the researcher often determine the style and outcomes of a study. A brief overview of research perspectives (schema) elucidates the range of possibilities available to a researcher, while also providing historical scaffolding for understanding the types of studies conducted concerning underachievement of the gifted (see Table 1).

The list of perspectives and the discussion that follows are illustrative only. The intent is to describe broad strands of scholarly thinking and approaches that guide research, rather than to be theoretically exhaustive. For example, Short (1991) described 17 alternatives of curriculum inquiry, but most of these are subsumed in the broad categories used in this article.

Process-Product Research

The field of education has not produced its own research methodology. Schema were applied from a variety of other scholarly works, including philosophy, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, history, and especially natural science. In education, the perspective of choice historically has been process-product research. Positivism grounds this approach where the researcher believes that truth can be found by examining, simplifying, experimenting, and refining hypotheses. Process-product research adheres to the tenets of the scientific method used extensively in the natural sciences. Educational situations
are perceived as a set of variables to be controlled, manipulated, and understood following a prescribed, replicable methodology. The researcher separates from the research setting, making observations, manipulating variables, and documenting results of the experimental condition while attempting to avoid influence in the field setting. Goals include discrete description of the research setting, lucid articulation of the research process, and generalizability to other educational settings (Arhar et al., 1997; Patton, 1990; Shulman, 1986).

**Classroom Ecology Research**

Classroom ecology incorporates the ideology that education is a complex enterprise. Classrooms cannot be considered a set of discrete objects that can be individually manipulated and understood. The classroom ecologist honors complexity in the research setting, whereas the positivist attempts to categorize influences to limit complexity.

The classroom ecologist understands there are several intervening variables interacting in a research setting. This knowledge is based on subtle interactions and contextual influences such as facial expression, voice inflection, and body language. This schema is based on the principles of psychology and ecology, with discovery developed through interpretation of the situation based on the interactions of many components of the milieu (Arhar et al., 1997; Duckworth, 1987; Patton, 1990; Shulman, 1986).

**Teacher Thinking Research**

Teacher thinking research is grounded in social psychology and philosophy. The focus of the researcher is on the thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs of the teacher in the classroom. The perceptions, expectations, and prior experiences of the teacher determine outcomes of the learning setting, and results are based on the teacher’s ability to rationalize his or her patterns and actions. Again, complex interactions are of paramount concern in this schema. However, the teacher is the focus of the educational experience and the main determiner of student learning. Persons supporting the need for accountability in schools often adhere to this schema. Through manipulation of the teacher’s belief set, accountability and student learning are believed to be the outcomes (Arhar et al., 1997; Patton, 1990; Shulman, 1986).

**Teacher Research**

Teacher research moves slightly beyond the horizon of the teacher thinking researcher. In this schema, the teacher is the main instrument of education and educational

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**Table 1**

**Philosophies Behind Research Approaches**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schema</th>
<th>Root</th>
<th>Mode of Thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process–Product Research</td>
<td>Positivism; Science</td>
<td>Truth can be found by simplification, control, experimentation, and refinement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Ecology Research</td>
<td>Psychology; Ecology</td>
<td>Truth is an interpretation based on several intervening variables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Thinking Research</td>
<td>Philosophy; Social Psychology</td>
<td>Truth is determined by perceptions, expectations, and prior experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Research</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Truth evolves from action in situated practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociocritical (Deconstructivist) Research</td>
<td>Economics; Sociology</td>
<td>Truth is a hegemony of the ruling elite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex Milieu (Interrelational) Research</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary</td>
<td>Truth claims are differentiated by role, status, and interpretations; continually being reconceptualized and interpreted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The following references were used in the development of this table: Arhar et al., 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Duckworth, 1987; Patton, 1990; Shulman, 1986; and van Manen, 1977.
change in the classroom. Teacher research is grounded in sociology, where the impact of the setting evolves from action in practice. Teacher research often involves emic issues of classroom pedagogy. The teacher perceives a situation of concern in the classroom and initiates an exploratory process to attempt to alter the situation into a more amenable outcome. This schema places responsibility on the teacher for educational change at the local (classroom) level. In the literature, this schema is called “action research” and deals with issues of practical concern, rarely exploring theoretical implications (Arhar et al., 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 1990; Shulman, 1986).

**Sociocritical Research**

Sociocritical research descends from economics and sociology. The sociocritical researcher is concerned with definitions of “good” and issues of control and power. Exploration of the power relations in an educational setting determines the outcomes and underlying principles in place. Often, these issues are beyond the sight of the teacher or students, existing in the bureaucratic and political realms of education. The sociocritical researcher is driven by reaction to perceived power struggles and incorporates a process of “unpacking” the research site to expose social considerations of justice, care, and value (Arhar et al., 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 1990; Shulman, 1986).

**Interrelational Research**

Finally, interrelational research honors complexity in the educational process. The interrelational researcher brings multiple perspectives to the research enterprise grounded in several broad areas of knowledge, expertise, and role (e.g., student, teacher, custodian). Results depend on constant negotiation between all stakeholders in the research setting determined by role, status, and personal interpretation. Participants in this schema are valuable contributors to one another’s understanding and the researcher’s interpretation of events. All individuals in the milieu (including the researcher) contribute equally to the discussion and presentation of the findings (Arhar et al., 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 1990; Shulman, 1986; van Manen, 1977).

**Borderlines and Boundaries**

With the exception of interrelational research, students are not highly regarded in the research practices used to explore education. Interestingly, common sense dictates that an individual involved in a setting is often the most knowledgeable source of information about that setting. Why is it that gifted underachieving students have not been included as primary data sources in educational research?

A broader research viewpoint must be embraced in order to understand the plight of gifted underachievers. Philosophically, a repositioning in perspective should occur. Above, as the discussion moved from process-product to interrelational research schema, the complexity (“messiness”) of the research methodology became apparent. Philosophically, the movement to interrelational research honored the complexity involved in life and living, paying particular attention to each player in the educational process. The interrelational approach grounds the discussion to follow. This purposeful choice provides space honoring all scholarly perspectives, rather than establishing a hierarchy meant to propel a few viewpoints into prominence while marginalizing others.

Qualitative research methods seek to explore the intricacies of life and living from various perspectives. Yet, few instances of qualitative research concerned with gifted underachievement exist in the literature (see Keighley, 1996; Moore, 1996; Schultz, 1999). In the section that follows, a typology of qualitative research methods suggests implications for understanding the life stories of gifted underachievers.

This is not to say that process-product research exists in opposition to the broader perspective discussed in the last section of this article. Quantitative study provides fertile foundation for theorists and researchers to explore settings from broad perspectives, often extending discussions about validity and truth claims. Together, broad research perspectives (quantitative and qualitative) provide insights and an articulation of truthfulness and reality beyond the ability of any one approach. It remains the task of the reader to consider all approaches when evaluating the transferability or generalizability of findings to their experiential realm.

The issue of how research is conducted should reflect what approach will best address the questions of the study and not be based solely on transition or fashion. We need to widen our conceptual blinders to include other views of the world and voices of people historically not included in the picture. We also need to be open to criticism from intellectual traditions not common to our familiar world (Cross, 1994, p. 285).

Again, the underlying position and beliefs of the researcher determine the questions asked and style of research done. However, it is imperative that multiple perspectives (schema) be used to examine issues of teaching.
and learning. Lived experiences of each individual in education add important contributions to understanding this complex enterprise. Opportunities exist for thoughtful understanding.

The following sections provide a typology (see Table 2) of research approaches addressing these opportunities. The discussion is descriptive in tone, intent on providing background information for consideration. Specific case studies have been purposefully avoided to promote thinking and discussion. Future works will present case studies specific to each approach.

Detailing a typology is fraught with the impression that distinct research positions separate a researcher’s choices in the field. The overlap between the following positions is much more prevalent than the separation of perspectives shown. Appropriate choice and implementation comes from work in the field setting, with change being the constant in this enterprise. The reader is encouraged to consider the following discussion as foundational. Citations are provided to guide additional study and develop personal meaning.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy. Key philosophers discussing and grounding phenomenology as an area of emphasis are: Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), Edmund Husserl (1962, 1964, 1970), Martin Heidegger (1962), and Alfred Schutz (1967). The collective works of these philosophers define phenomenology in great detail and are encouraged as supplements to this discussion.

Phenomenology attempts to develop an understanding about the complex needs of participants by accessing and documenting life experiences (Burch, 1989; Grumet, 1976; McEwen, 1980; Polakow, 1984; van Manen, 1979, 1984, 1990; Willis, 1979, 1991). The phenomenological researcher is a recorder whose job is to describe. The goal is to provide voice for the participant, not to interpret or subjugate meaning through the lenses of perception, expectation, or prior experience of the researcher (Aoki, 1988).

The point of phenomenological research is to “borrow” other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to come to a better understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience in the context of the whole of human experience. (van Manen, 1990, p. 62)

At heart, the process of phenomenological research is an artistic endeavor. Through careful negotiation, the essence of meaning of others is captured. The phenomenological researcher ascribes to a subordinate position, channeling thoughts back through the participant to gather essential lived experience.

The basic methodology is simply to collect as many reports as possible of the life interpretations of others and let these reports speak for themselves (Polakow, 1984; van Manen, 1984; Willis, 1979). If any manipulation is evident, the participant, to instill appropriateness and validity, must check it. The phenomenological researcher must present vignettes in a grounded state where the meaning is as close to reality for the participant as possible. This can be problematic as the researcher attempts to weave disparate participant experiences into a meaningful whole. The researcher is not interested in the entire milieu of the research setting and must filter his or her interpretations out of the descriptions of setting and place to present the “beingness” of participants (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991). Yet, the researcher must paint a vivid picture for the reader to become familiar with the environment in which the study took place.

Semiotically, crafting experience and meaning into words and then writing alters the truthfulness of the lived experience. Experience rarely translates into communicable details through voice or writing; therefore, it is lost in the process. At best, phenomenological experiences exist as metaphors for meaning in the written word (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In addition, phenomenological research reports are interpreted by the reader and altered. The “reading” of the text and, therefore, the desires of the audience concerning the project interpret the participant voice. All humans tend to interpret based on their truth claims, reading into others’ expressions.

Phenomenological studies are scrutinized for appropriateness and validity. Exploring the life experiences and the meaning making of others is a rigorous process of non-interpretation. The phenomenological researcher must keep a coherent audit trail including field notes, researcher reflection log detailing how the experiences of the research project affect the reporter, and detailed transcription records for verification of statements and meaning documentation.

Phenomenology provides a means of documenting and communicating the life experiences of gifted underachievers from their perspectives (e.g., Schultz, 1999). This approach contributes a “voice” to the literature base in gifted child education that historically has been methodologically ignored: that of the gifted underachiever living his or her life. Phenomenology provides depth and breadth from the participants’ perspectives regarding actions and tendencies taking place in the research setting.
Table 2
Genre of Qualitative Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Root</th>
<th>Broad Perspective</th>
<th>Exploratory Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>What is the essence of meaning for these people?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>Literary Criticism, Anthropology</td>
<td>Interpretive</td>
<td>What happened and what was the context of the situation? What was the culture at the time and place the event occurred?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnographic Narrative</td>
<td>Anthropology, Sociology</td>
<td>Descriptive-Interpretive</td>
<td>What makes it possible to interpret these meanings? What is the culture of this group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberative Hermeneutic</td>
<td>Sociology, Theology, Philosophy, Literary Criticism</td>
<td>Interpretive-Reactional</td>
<td>Under what conditions did a human act occur? How do multiple perspectives interact to provide meaning? What do I believe and how does this “stack up” with others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Social Psychology</td>
<td>Reactional-Interpretive</td>
<td>Who benefits from what is occurring? What forces act to marginalize and control actions? What hegemony exits?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic</td>
<td>Humanistic Psychology</td>
<td>Reactional (post hoc)</td>
<td>How does the action or event affect me? What interrelationships are evident?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary</td>
<td>Reactional (in situ)</td>
<td>How can actions be changed? What can I do to increase effectiveness? What definition of “good” should be enforced in this setting?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Historical Inquiry

Inquiry results in interpretation of events through the frames or lenses of the researcher. Data exist as artifacts of events or places in the public or private realm. The researcher interprets the milieu encountered through study of the artifacts, with an emphasis on understanding the document analysis by framing events in a plausible scheme (Carr, 1962; Davis, 1991; Gottschalk, 1969; Marius, 1989).

The perceptions, expectations, and experiences of the historical researcher are critical tools used to make meaning for the chain of events before and after the documented data. The researcher must attempt to place perspective into the data through ethical and authentic analysis. Primary sources are of the utmost importance, with secondary and tertiary data framed as an interpretive lens to view the primary data sources.

An historical researcher encounters bias in the data sources. Each document or artifact was composed from the interpretive framework of the author. None may exhibit truth in events or actions, yet the historical researcher is bound to use these biased primary sources as the only viable means of examining historical events (Marius, 1989).

The historical researcher’s analysis is framed by his or her interpretations based on scholarly preparations and secondary and tertiary source alignment. Stories told must be supported by and traceable to valid evidence (Nevins, 1938). The researcher must describe chains of events or actions, key players and participants, and significant turning points in enough detail to develop sufficient depth for the reader to formulate a realistic portrayal of the times studied (Gottschalk, 1969).

Historical research must incorporate social, intellectual, and educational contexts of time and place appropriate to
the dates of the study. Viewpoints and perspectives must be evenly presented and justifiably explored. The writing must aspire to graceful literary expression, yet clearly articulate the significance of events (Marius, 1989).

The brief discussion presented in an earlier section of this paper provides an historical view of underachievement of the gifted. It was framed by the question, “What historical records document studies conducted that focus on underachieving gifted students?” Additional explorations of existing artifacts with a different focal question can provide alternative views rich with implications for understanding the longitudinal effects of underachievement. Each of these perspectives alone can offer insight into the lives of underachieving gifted individuals. Together, in a type of metahistorical analysis, these separate explorations using different lenses, can provide a rich description of gifted students’ underachievement.

**Ethnographic Narrative**

Ethnographic narrative attempts to explain the culture of a setting through a description of the site and interpretation of events from the perspective of the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Fetterman, 1989; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spindler, 1982). The researcher not only records the milieu for use in vividly portraying the setting in the research report, but also interprets actions and events based on his or her perspectives, expectations, and prior experiences. These “truth claims” and assumptions are thoroughly described to the reader in the opening of the narrative report to guide the reader’s interpretations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Ethnographic narrative researchers are concerned with wholeness in setting, interactions, and relationships. The fieldwork takes place in situ, using personal, face-to-face contact during the action. Focus on understanding situated practice, rather than predicting past or future events, is key. The ethnographic researcher constantly analyzes events and actions, which contributes to a process of continual reflectivity. The researcher is a research instrument—indeed, the research instrument for engaging in fieldwork and making meaning of events and actions. The researcher adds depth and breadth to understanding about specific cultural events by taking part in them in a participant observer role (Spradley, 1980).

The researcher provides a description of all interactions taking place between characters in the field (including his or her actions that may have changed the research setting). Also, the researcher’s assumptions, perceptions, expectations, and prior experiences are laid bare for the reader to interpret (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Gifted underachievement can be extensively explored through researcher self-talk about a definition for this label and a description of the research setting where individuals exist that may or may not fit the researcher’s label as defined. Interpretation is presented, but from a position that clearly articulates how the setting changed the researcher as much as how the researcher contributed to the setting.

Multiple narratives sculpt final report preparation. A shared narrative construction and reconstruction occur as all stakeholders (including the researcher) vie for understanding and sense of place. Participants negotiate meaning with the researcher. However, the ethnographic narrative researcher makes the ultimate decisions on what truth claims and interpretive meaning are included in the final report. When done properly, the final report reflects a sense of the whole, rather than a series of detailed minutia or aggrandizement of the researcher’s role.

**Deliberative Hermeneutic Inquiry**

Deliberative hermeneutic inquiry engages in the activity of interpreting our lives and the world around us. At the same time, the deliberative hermeneutic researcher realizes that interpretation of lived experience presents only a partial view of reality (Schwab, 1978a, b, c, d).

The deliberative hermeneutic researcher strives to open space for communication, clarifying and delineating dogmatic principles with the intent of moving beyond boundaries to engage many traditional methods of interpreting reality in a common cause (Gadamer, 1977, 1981; Heidegger, 1962). This cause is about creating meaning from the situated practice of living amidst stories, interpreting and understanding based on our place in the milieu, but striving to develop broad meaning from seemingly senseless dichotomies.

Deliberative hermeneutic research includes a report of the transformations the researcher has undergone in the process of the inquiry. Attention is focused on language itself, on how it is used and how others use it to interpret meaning (Derrida, 1978; DeSaussure, 1959; Ricoeur, 1985). The researcher imaginatively engages participants in the research setting, drawing attention to what is at work in particular ways of speaking and acting. The intent is to foster an ever deepening appreciation of the wholeness and integrity of the world, which must be present for thought and action to be possible. In educational research, this involves the student, teacher, subject, and milieu as viable components that must be engaged in order to develop understanding (Schwab, 1978d).
This process is deliberative in that it involves all stakeholders in problem exploration to interweave interpretation. The deliberative hermeneutic researcher acknowledges that the character of problems “depends on the discerning eye of the beholder” (Schwab, 1978a, p. 316). A fundamental assumption is that problems are practical and can be solved through negotiation between participants. Conclusions drawn are not claims for general knowledge; rather, they exist as guides for making decisions about plans for action.

Using this deliberative process, gifted underachievers, after being told they had been identified, would be asked for input to clarify their position. Discussion focuses on what it means to carry such a label and how the individuals labeled feel about and present themselves to others in the face of this label. Negotiation occurs between the identified gifted underachievers and the researcher, with participant-derived plans of action generated based on perceptions, expectations, and experiences of all involved (researcher, gifted underachievers, and other individuals who are part of the milieu of the research setting). Outcomes could include a more concrete definition of underachievement based on classroom interactions and clarification of how this label affects the learner in a unique setting.

**Critical Inquiry**

In critical inquiry, the researcher reacts to and interprets events as a stakeholder in the research milieu (Giroux, 1981; Gitlin, 1990; Gitlin, Siegel, & Boru, 1988; Goodman, 1992; Lather, 1986). The researcher is concerned with developing a meaning for “good” and uncovering who benefits from various actions and interactions (Apple, 1996; McLaren, 1988). Underpinning this inquiry scheme is a commitment to social justice—to the ideals of justice as fairness (Rawls, 1971, 1985).

Critical inquiry engages knowledge as speculative, as a heuristic for the establishment of a set of principles that guide actions. Participants in the setting are akin to pawns in a complex melodrama of hegemony (Apple, 1979, 1996; Gramsci, 1975). The researcher’s role is to reflect on a situation, parlaying his or her understanding and interpretations into action guided by explicit, normative considerations based on the milieu.

The critical researcher’s report is a generative action plan, bringing critical knowledge to bear upon practice, while at the same time recognizing the contribution of practice to furthering critical knowledge. The researcher may choose to become directly involved in the action plan development and leadership, or he or she may contribute as an interested observer and reporter, delineating inconsistencies in interpretation and guiding negotiation while remaining subordinate to other stakeholders.

For example, a critical inquiry approach may contend the educational environment is inappropriate, rather than make the typical assumption that the students are in need of repair. Rimm (1988) presented a wide and varied typology of underachieving tendencies through student caricature and example. The critical researcher explores the evidence, implications, and results, noting discrepancies or disalignment, ultimately building a case that may expose Rimm’s labels as externally imposed means of controlling students by casting their frustrations and lack of appropriate learning opportunities as behavior problems, thereby dismissing students’ lived experiences. An inappropriate assumption of power may exist; the researcher (as expert) ignores student humanness, oppressing and suppressing at the same time.

The ultimate result of critical inquiry is the establishment of a modicum of change in a milieu guided by a plan of action based on the inquiry. In essence, truth claims and establishment of “good” are put into practice at the conclusion of the inquiry.

**Aesthetic Inquiry**

Aesthetic inquiry involves the artistic act of connoisseurship (Eisner, 1985). The aesthetic researcher seeks to identify experiential qualities underlying a situation and the governing reaction to it. Once these qualities are identified, the researcher attempts to present them in a way that guides others to see them and, thus, to understand the situation, action, or event more fully (McCutcheon, 1979).

Meaning is negotiated through the aesthetic researcher’s post hoc reaction to and expression of situated practice. In this “reading” of the event, both the big picture and intimate details are necessarily components of the writing act. The aesthetic researcher must have a set of guiding principles and experiences that will shape reactions to situations and stimulate intelligent reflection and discussion about them.

A vivid portrait of the situation is presented to the reader. Aesthetic researchers necessarily concern themselves with the impact of setting, space, interactions, and perceptions (both their own and their readers’) in the crafted story. The goal is to begin a conversation, providing multiple pathways so that readers can engage in their own interpretive scheme of understanding. Truth is not pre-
sented through the crafted aesthetic story. Instead, a sense of possibility and authenticity is developed and placed into the hands of the reader for reflection and meaning making. Plausibility through interpretation is the gain.

An aesthetic researcher interested in gifted underachievement could present case studies of various degrees of gifted underachievement with the intent of clarifying actions and intent for the reader. In this way, a broad sweep of existing situations are engaged that may allow the reader to see beyond the limits of a label such as “underachieving gifted” to address the social, emotional, spiritual, and perceptual positions played out in the research setting. In a relational sense, this article is presented as aesthetic inquiry into the state of affairs present, past, and future regarding underachievement of the gifted learner.

Interactional Inquiry

The interactional researcher is a committed participant in the research setting. In education, this is usually a teacher interested in personal improvement (although any classroom participant can be involved in interactional research). Interactional research incorporates three distinct criteria:

1. improvement of a practice;
2. improvement of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners; and
3. improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 165).

The interactional researcher poses questions based on his or her perspectives, expectations, or experiences regarding a situation. These truth claims and assumptions guide the researcher to questions and studies aimed at changing the milieu for the better.

The teacher and students are participant observers in a naturalistic setting in which research opportunities present themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the ideal change agent in the classroom is the teacher because this person is theoretically in charge of developing the classroom environment. However, this does not mean that students and others taking part in the environment are delegated to minor roles or become “the researched.”

In a reactive manner, the interactional researcher alters classroom practices and the setting to explore personal definitions of good practice (Gregory, 1988; Schubert, 1980). Students are coresearchers with valuable insights that contribute to a community definition of “good.” Formal research reports are rarely developed. Changes in situated practice and classroom action are typically the outcome of this line of inquiry (Kemmis & DiChiro, 1987; Wallace, 1987).

Implications for the gifted underachiever include the ability to contribute to and alter the classroom setting in order to have needs met that may otherwise be ignored or not identified. Teachers and students contribute equally to the development of an appropriate learning environment, with negotiation and discussion about positive and negative experiences embedded in the milieu of daily interactions. The goal is to establish a learning community based on the needs of each student in concert with those of the teacher. Balance, tolerance, and acceptance of difference are keys to action plan development for the classroom. Negotiation is ongoing, with flexibility and open communication understood and honored.

In Retrospect

Historically, underachieving gifted students in the classroom have been viewed as defective merchandise in need of repair. Research has been conducted to learn how these children deviate from their peers, and strategies have been postulated to rehabilitate them (Bachtold, 1969; Baymur & Patterson, 1960; Brophy, 1982; Dunn, 1963; Durr & Collier, 1960; Gallacher & Rogge, 1966; Gowan, 1957; Karmes et al., 1963; Kimball, 1953; Kurtz & Swenson, 1951; McGillivray, 1964; Morgan, 1952; Morrow & Wilson, 1961; Passow & Goldberg, 1958; Perkins, 1965, 1969; Pierce & Bowman, 1960, pp. 33-66; Purkey, 1969; Raph et al., 1966; Rust & Ryan, 1953; Shaw & Black, 1960; Shaw & McCuen, 1960; Shoukhnsmith & Taylor, 1964; Tetrault, 1965).

Currently, much theoretical interest is placed on development of higher order thinking skills, critical thinking, problem solving, and lifelong learning. However, the focus of research remains fundamentally the same: What strategies can be used to mold students to fit our theories of education and existing classroom environments? The names and jargon come and go, with social efficiency undergirding the process of educating our youth (Henderson & Hawthorne, 1995). Future research needs to move away from the “fix the broken” mentality of working on students, to one of working with students to develop understanding and learning—acknowledging and accepting cultural, social, economic, and spiritual differences that confound attempts to interpret reality from only one perspective.

Something more than measurable academic or cognitive outcomes must be addressed to understand adequate-
ly the complex needs of underachieving gifted learners in the classroom. Some researchers have begun the process of moving the research philosophy in gifted education away from the heavy emphasis on quantitative, process-product methodologies toward qualitative schema providing depth of understanding concerning all stakeholders in the education process (Emerick, 1988; Keighley, 1996; Moore, 1996; Schultz, 1999).

Focus on alternative research philosophies and designs must occur before the plight of the gifted underachiever is understood with enough detail to articulately alter setting and experiences. Alleviating tendencies leading to learner marginalization and perceived underachievement is the goal.

The aforementioned typology provides options that can broaden the focus of research. It is not presented as a means of replacing one or several philosophical perspectives with others. Rather, many approaches must be included to contribute to understanding and to honor more appropriately complexity in the educational enterprise.

This article provides a preliminary exploration of research alternatives to consider. The breadth and depth of understanding to be gained from qualitative designs far outweigh the eloquence and clarity of statistical analysis and provide context when considering whether or not the statistics from one study mean anything in other educational settings. In concert, quantitative and qualitative philosophical positions add to one another and should not be in binary opposition as focal extremes.

As we embrace a new millennium, it is hoped that research will no longer focus strictly on how to fix the gifted underachiever or conform these learners to the education system as it exists. Broadening the philosophical research focus can provide and enhance understanding and promote additional dialogue between gifted underachievers and individuals attempting to meet these diverse learners' needs.

References


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