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Using Life-Story Research in Gifted Education

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Abstract

In this article I discuss a promising approach to the problem of gifted underachievement, the research tradition of life story, and I examine the nature of constructed narratives and explain the narrative methods used to conduct this study. I include portions of one constructed narrative to illustrate the narrative product of life story research.

Using Life-Story Research in Gifted Education

That old saw, "the more things change the more they stay the same," is never truer than when applied to the topic of underachieving bright children. Nothing seems to bother educators and parents more than a child who appears fully capable of producing top-notch work, yet does not.

For nearly a century, parents, educators, and psychologists have been acutely aware of a group of students whose academic performance does not correlate with their ability. Examine any discussion in the gifted literature regarding the need for additional research, and the subject of underachievement by high-ability students is present (National Research Center on Gifted and Talented [NRC/GT], 2009; Niehart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002; Robinson, 2006; Schober, Reimann, & Wagner, 2004). Though gifted underachievement may seem like an obvious construct, there is nothing obvious about it; researchers, educators, and laypeople continue to disagree about the definitions of both giftedness and underachievement, as well as how each should be measured (Coleman, 2004; Reis & McCoach, 2000).

However one measures it, giftedness has a connection with high potential. That high potential may manifest itself through identification of high ability as measured by standardized mental ability and/or achievement tests, or by individual psychological/educational examination, self-identification (based upon an awareness of differences in ability to understand people, ideas or content knowledge with greater ease than peers), or peer nomination. Or, it could be reflected in exceptional creative products, performances, or leadership activities. It could also show in high grades, inclusion in special educational programming for gifted students, grade acceleration, early-admission into school, early college enrollment/dual enrollment in college and high school, and/or inclusion in accelerated classes. No matter how we specifically define giftedness, we often recognize it when we see it, just as we can often tell when an individual is not achieving to his or her ability. As far back as 1955, Gowan called underachievement "one of the greatest social wastes of our culture" (p. 247). Twenty years later, he revisited the topic, stating that research into gifted children had "turned up dry hole after dry hole," in investigating underachievement (Gowan, 1977).

Since that time, progress has been made; the hole is no longer dry, but neither has it produced a deep and reliable well of information with which to make consistently sound educational decisions. And, though hundreds of experts have written thousands of pages on underachievement in all its aspects (Beasley, 1957; Bricklin & Bricklin, 1967; DeLisle &

Berger, 1990; Dowdall, 1982; Fehrenbach, 1993; Frasier, et al., 1958; Gallagher, 1994; Hébert, 1991, 1999; Matthews & McBee, 2007; Rimm, 1987, 1988; Van Tassel-Baska, 2005; Whiting, 2009; Whitmore, 1980, 1986) and underachievement of gifted students specifically, just one study to date (Peterson, 2001) has sought information from adults who were themselves underachievers. To date, there exists no in-depth or large-scale study investigating those individuals who have managed to reverse their underachievement without benefit of formal interventions and then emerge as self-fulfilled adults. Studying these people, really listening to what they have to say via their personal narratives, inductively analyzed, offers us the opportunity to learn from their experiences and obtain the insider's views on underachievement.

The single most commonly encountered definition of underachievement was that of Whitmore, who referred to "students who demonstrate exceptionally high capacity for academic achievement and are not performing satisfactorily for their levels on daily academic tasks and achievement tests" (1980). Olenchak (1999) offered a more inclusive definition, stating that, "underachievement among gifted students, like giftedness and underachievement separately, is not a clearly defined construct" (p. 294), and that our definitions of underachievement need to include more than students' academic work because, "regardless of its context, underachievement eventually produces the same [negative] outcomes for gifted young people who experience it" (p.293).

Underachievement, like giftedness itself, can be identified through personal anecdotes, school records, test scores, work samples, and grades (Baum, Renzulli & Hébert, 1995; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996). Fehrenbach (1993) looked for, "established, self-defeating patterns of behavior," while Ford (1997) relied on psychometric definitions, qualitative, and/or subjective measures. No matter how you define or identify underachievement, one thing is clear: the failure of many of our most able students to reach their potential remains one of the most perplexing, challenging problems in education today, and how to teach and motivate high potential students to perform to their level of ability a major problem in today's educational community.

A New Lens for Understanding Underachieving Gifted Students

As a parent, educator, researcher, and problem solver who has practiced her craft in the educational community with students from preschool through graduate school, I can knowledgeably state that despite repeated efforts, few of us

have found keys that consistently unlock achievement motivation in students.

If “insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results” (Anonymous), could one of the primary obstacles to ‘solving’ this underachievement puzzle be related to how we have traditionally approached the conundrum, i.e., that something must be wrong with the student if s/he is not living up to his or her potential? What changes if we approach things from a different perspective, through a different educational lens?

When we begin to examine underachievement through several different lenses (family/parenting; intrapersonal/psychological; and school/teaching/curriculum) we uncover some startling revelations. In this article I discuss a promising approach to the problem of gifted underachievement—the research tradition of life story—and I examine the nature of constructed narratives and explain the narrative methods used to conduct this study. I include portions of one constructed narrative to illustrate the narrative product of life-story research. Data analysis, including that done through qualitative data analysis software, findings, and discussion are the focus of another paper, which will include portions of a second constructed life story.

Research questions

Though life story research is by its very nature dynamic, with questions evolving throughout a study, I began this study with two main (sets of) questions: The first question examines how it was that some gifted individuals (who significantly underachieved while students) were able to eventually overcome their problems and become high achieving adult citizens? Related to that question are these: What factor(s) do they perceive as being critical to their success? Was there some particular moment when they suddenly decided to change? Did they change, or did factors outside themselves change? Do they attribute their current self-fulfilled state to their own hard work, or to others’ interventions?

The second question is: to what do they attribute their former achievement problems? Other, related questions are: Were there particular environmental, intrapersonal, or societal factors they felt caused the problem(s)? Why do they feel interventions aimed at reversing the underachievement failed? If they had the opportunity to go back and be students again, would they? If they were able to control all external and internal factors, would they do anything differently? Do these individuals wish they had become achievers at an earlier age, or do they perceive benefits from their experiences, no matter how negative?

The research methodology

Over a period of about ten years, I have collected or supervised the collection of life stories of nearly 80 men and women who formerly underachieved, but who now consider themselves successful adults. An initial pilot study included one male and one female participant, and my dissertation included four individuals who clearly met my parameters. Since then, I have added 70 additional cases to the aggregated data, using the same methodology.

Each participant’s story is an individual case study as well as a part of the cross-case analysis, lending greater reliability and

perhaps generalizability to the findings (Merriam, 1988), because patterns that emerge through the study of individual life stories or case studies can help strengthen the internal validity of research. Purposive sampling was used to choose four prospective participants, representative of intensity samples (Patton, 2002) of chronic underachievers (those who underachieved over a multi-year period), since they were my primary area of interest (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Intensity samples, or those that are neither extreme cases of the phenomenon under study nor marginal ones, are, instead, intense exemplars from which we can learn. Because the literature has shown differences in the experiences of underachievement between males and females, there was equal representation of both sexes.

A wide-ranging network of friends and acquaintances permitted use of a variation of what LeComte and Preissle (1993) call “networking sampling,” and Patton (2002, p.194) refers to as “snowball sampling,” to recruit participants. The purest form of network sampling, or snowball sampling, involves identifying one person who fits the requirements of the study, then having them identify someone else who possesses the desired characteristics, repeatedly until the desired sample size is attained. Simple and elegant, the researcher contacts her network, which then spreads the news through their contacts, resulting in an ever-increasing collection of potential participants from which to choose.

Defining ‘gifted’ and ‘successful adult’

Because of the nature of this study, it seemed logical that if people were underachievers as children or youth they required some time to reverse their underachievement, as well as time to develop expertise in their area of success. Since it generally requires at least ten years to become expert in a field (Bloom, 1985), this meant study participants had to be at least approximately 30 years old. Since educational programming designed specifically for gifted students is a relatively recent phenomenon, I chose a ceiling age of 60 years. Historical indicators of giftedness mentioned earlier—grade acceleration, early admission, dual enrollment in college, and special classes—were included as well. Since giftedness is a difficult to define and often controversial topic, for the purpose of this study a participant was considered gifted if at least three of the following criteria were met: formal identification of high-ability as measured by standardized mental ability and/or achievement tests, individual psychological/educational examination, self-identification (based upon an awareness of differences in ability to understand people, ideas or content knowledge with greater ease than peers), high grades, inclusion in special educational programming for gifted students, grade acceleration, early-admission into school, early college enrollment/dual enrollment in college and high school, demonstrated creative ability, awards for exceptional creativity or academic performance, and/or inclusion in accelerated classes.

In addition to identifying the potential participant as gifted, I also had to ascertain whether he or she considered himself or herself to be a successful adult. Success is a personally defined construct. For the purpose of this study, I examined the criterion of success by asking potential participants three questions: are you personally capable and fulfilled? Have you attained competence in your chosen discipline? Do you feel

self fulfilled? Affirmative answers to these questions, combined with appropriate responses to the previous questions allowed us to proceed to the next level, an invitation to participate in the study. Participants also each identified a pseudonym by which to be known in the study data. To gather the life story, each participant completed a lengthy questionnaire that examined familial, school, and intrapersonal factors, and also participated in a lengthy life-story interview with a researcher.

The value of life story and narrative

Life histories have been collected for centuries, evolving from oral history and other ethnographic approaches to data collection. The use of life stories, "for serious academic study is considered to have begun in psychology with Freud's 1910 psychoanalytic interpretation of individual case studies" (Atkinson, 1998, p.3). After Freud, life stories were used throughout the 1930's, 40's and 50's by psychologists and researchers such as Erikson, though not frequently until about the 1980's. Since that time, the contemporary use of life-story research as a type of narrative inquiry has increased, mainly in the disciplines of sociology, education, and health care, and has become a growing element in the narrative study of lives (Cohler, 1988; Gergen & Gergen, 1993; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993). Atkinson (1998) called the subjective narrative of the life story the quintessential way to help the researcher comprehend the phenomenon under study from the insider's point of view. Bertraux (1981) saw the life-story narrative as providing not only that point of view, but also a constructed view of the social reality existing outside the story, as explained by the narrative.

Collecting, examining, then comparing life stories gathered from participants with shared experience (cross-case analysis) also provides the researcher insight into how particular social factors, events, and political forces may have contributed to their experiences as related to particular phenomena (Stewart, 1994). This allows the words of people who lived the underachievement experience to inform us about how we can better help certain gifted students become achievers.

Transforming and therapeutic are commonly applied words when mentioning narrative, even when therapy is not an intended result. Most people have experienced a time when the simple unburdening of a story became a cathartic event. Others have experienced the crystallizing moment during the telling of a story when suddenly all becomes clear. Conversely, many of us have experienced the heavy weight of a story left untold; secrets left unshared. Duhl stated,

Stories are like jazz. They have different meanings to different people. They allow for interaction, for surprise, and for finding new and alternative ways to cope. At different times, when repeated, they have new meanings. Stories permit each of us to learn at our own pace (1999, p.542).

Narrative inquiry makes it possible for a person to tell his or her story in the manner in which he or she wishes to tell it to a non-judgmental listener. This is important because sometimes people's stories are either not allowed voice at all, or are not of their own creation, or both, but are instead foisted on them by someone more powerful than they. This "silencing" (Lister, 1982) often lies at the center of problems, including achievement problems, plaguing people. Whether silencing is

actual physical violence; a family environment steeped in secretiveness; social isolation related to the way we live in modern societies; or attached to issues of authority such as those found in schools (Lister, 1982; McLeod, 1996), the effect is the same: people are prevented from telling their stories and from gaining the associated therapeutic effects of narrative.

Constructed narratives

Each recorded interview took from 1 to 3 hours to complete. Following the interviews, verbatim transcriptions were performed. The next step involved the transformation of transcripts into narratives, stories by which each individual located themselves, their giftedness, underachievement, and subsequent successes in their worlds. In this process, the researcher does not choose what to preserve and what to discard; everything was retained. Choices were only made about the organization of the narratives; in what order should the raw interview material that initially had a stream-of-consciousness quality be finally presented?

There are many types and levels of meaning in narratives. The words a person chooses to speak have meanings, the place where we begin and end our stories has meanings, pauses and small vocalizations have meanings. The things we choose not to say have meanings. The challenge, then, was to find a way to maintain the integrity of each person's story, while creating a narrative flow. By moving chunks of the transcriptions around, using each participant's words exactly as spoken, I created a story that read well. Because meaning resides in both words and experiences, some chunks were grouped together by words, others by meaning. The flow of the narratives is loosely chronological, from earliest remembrances to the present.

When people answer open-ended questions, they do not usually do so in a linear fashion, though the degree of directness varies from person to person. Instead, we tell small stories to illustrate points in the greater narrative; we digress, circling the issue, repeating various points throughout the entirety of a conversation or interview. Sometimes we just stop, and then resume, without ever having answered the question. Left as raw transcripts these narratives are difficult to follow, the structure of the narrative often interfering with our ability to discern meaning. By constructing these narratives into stories, each has a beginning, middle, and end. Each contains a problem or problems, some explicitly stated, some only implicitly. Each narrative has its own cast of characters, concurrent plots, and a happy ending of sorts. The construction of each narrative took at least as long as the initial interview had, though some took much longer. Construction was carefully performed to respectfully preserve each speaker's intent. Creating story flow without the insertion of transition sentences was challenging. Long pauses, laughs, or any other notable instances were bracketed within the text. Words or phrases emphasized by the individual were placed in bold print. An ellipsis was used to indicate small conversational pauses, breaks, in the conversation. Interviewer questions were not included in the text.

Keeping narratives in their owners' hands

Because this is life-story research, there was another step in my research process: presenting the collected data to study participants and having them check for accuracy (Hones,

1998; Nye, 1997), otherwise known as member checking. Participants own these, their stories, and thus have the right to edit their own words and ensure accurate representation of themselves. Member checking was originally to have taken place in a follow-up interview, but for both participant and researcher convenience, was instead done by email. Once I had transcribed the taped interviews and written a biographical piece derived from the initial telephone calls and life-story questionnaire, I emailed this document to each participant, asking him or her to check for veracity and accuracy, and inviting them to change what they felt needed to change. Though this was a potentially risky undertaking, one where participants could choose to heavily edit work already carefully done, it was a step crucial to the process of narrative analysis. Why?

Data collected and subsequent writings were not only based upon the participants' stories, they were the participants' stories. When interviews were transcribed, they were transcribed verbatim, with the exception of researcher questions, when possible, and the usual ums, ahs, and you knows deleted to improve narrative flow. Participants completed their questionnaires, told their stories, made their own interpretations of what was occurring, and why, then had the opportunity to examine their interview transcriptions and what I wrote by means of member checks. Member checks were completed during the finalization of my construction of the narratives, and the last changes were received after I had finished all the narrative construction. Though momentarily exasperated, I did the right thing, and never even opened the email before assuring the participant that I would honor any changes she wished to make. The story was her story. Though I was the one asking questions and searching for narrative spaces in the stories, I was merely the sounding board, the conduit through which their stories and their interpretations of those stories traveled, sometimes for the first time. Knowing "What to leave in and what to leave out: choosing to be sensitive to individuals who allowed me to enter into their stories and lives" (deMarras, 1998, p.151) was one of my greatest challenges in the writing up of this information, so I handled it by returning the power to edit to the rightful owners.

Limitations of the method

My studies to date have indicated a high degree of consistency among the initial two, then four, then 76 stories, with more similarities than differences between them. It stands to reason that when this many people with entirely different experiences of giftedness, representing both sexes and with a 20-year spread in age tell stories of such similarity, they must be of some merit. These stories, purposefully selected, cannot be generalized to all gifted children and adults, but may be considered trustworthy enough to teach important lessons. Each individual's narrative had a high degree of internal consistency between the interview material, questionnaire data, and follow-up questions and answers; their stories did not change according to what they thought I wanted to hear, nor were they scripted, pat responses. As mentioned earlier, analyses are ongoing and specific findings will be the subject of future papers.

To illustrate the potential of this research genre, below I present a few brief snippets from one participant's life-story interview. Casey, a 31-year-old male former underachieving

gifted student (now successful attorney) is the topic of a constructed narrative that fills 31 double-spaced pages. While interesting to read, for the sake of brevity I have included excerpts only.

Excerpts from Casey's life-story

I still remember... it was in second grade, Miss Clifton and Miss Morris. Miss Clifton told me to take a test. I asked her what for, and she said something to the effect of we just want to see how well you do, or something. It was a test, so I took it, and all of a sudden, the next semester, so I must have taken it in the fall, and so it was the next semester they took the students, they got divided up differently. Never said a word about anything. The next thing I knew I was in a different group of kids. When I was in the third grade, they identified it was gifted. Yeah, I got told I was gifted from the time I was in third grade until the time I graduated from high school. Once you put that label on there...being GT was tough, what they did though, was they put you in classes with the advanced kids.

Both the GT and the advanced students were smart, but not the same, but they worked hard. They were smart, but on a certain level, I like to put it, my computer worked a little faster. They're the ones who answered all 50 of the homework problems and showed their work. And I said, man, what they'd do that for? Didn't you figure it out after ten problems? They had that need, and the teacher told them to do it, so they did it, but those people are what we call in college, "beat the bull"... in college. So, they frustrated me on one sense because on some of them I, I know I can do these faster than you can, but they played the game and I was like, "why are you playing the game, you can go so much farther, stop playing their game, play my game. Do it like I do it and we can convince them to change the system." [laugh] I was, like, how do I manipulate the system to benefit me? That was the nature of the idea. But there were these people who were playing the game, and I thought, you're messing me up! As I reflect back on that, I recognize what was going on and I wish I had been one of them. I almost wish I had just been that advanced student who had played by the rules and attempted to work within the system.

I was a band nerd. I have friends that were band nerds ...who, the mere concept of that sent them into a frenzy...I think everyone needs a group...I think I see that in any extracurricular. But whether you're in any athletics or whatever else, you always fit in somewhere... in your group. I think the students that don't have anything to belong to that are more of a problem ...probably have less time...not less time... just more of a problem. I think that's what probably saved me in high school, because if I hadn't been in band, or tried to participate in extracurriculars [pause] I don't know what would have happened. Because if I was left to my own devices, you know, go to school, go home, do nothing.... I probably would have made a fascinating criminal at some point.

That self-confidence led me to probably make choices and determinations.... in. ... math homework was a

great one. I hated math homework. I hated math homework because they give you fifty problems, and they are dealing with the same concept. After I did about ten of them, I'm like, this is the same thing...so what if you change the numbers...ok...so I get a different answer, but it's the same concept. It really came out in Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II... those were the three absolute worst...I was like, this was retarded...oh, I hated showing my work! $3X=15$; x is 5. Go to town; we're done. I don't need to show you divide by three on each side and give you your answer. Having married a teacher, I understand why they do it now, but... I guess that was part of my underachievement was that I'd go to the teacher and say, "I can do that; test me on it," and they would, and I'd take a test and I'd do fine. My grades were not reflective of knowledge or anything else. They were reflective of that the system said we're gonna put more emphasis on homework, because... I think because the stupid people are still stuck in your class with you, and they need all the practice and everything they get...they need the cheap, easy grades. I was like, just give me my grade on my tests. I think a lot of the teachers were just really frustrated with me when they saw how good I could do on the tests...I don't remember which of the teachers it was who said, "why don't you just do your homework," and I was, like, "because it's... boring."

I was in Aldine. They had gifted and talented and advanced. AP classes were just starting to be offered around then. I remember in my senior year I had the choice between taking AP English or gifted and talented, and I realized "something's wrong" with this system. I mean, I'm GT what the hell's with this AP crap? At the time I thought that by taking AP English I wasn't going to be with the same kids I'd always been with. I think there were fourteen of us. We were pretty much in the same classes together. There were a group of 4 or 5 of us who came out of elementary that went to junior high. In junior high the group expanded by about 2 or 3, and by high school, because there were more junior highs, we expanded up to about 14. We were the same groups of kids from 9th grade to 12th grade.

I think that at some level, you almost have to be a little bit gifted to understand another gifted person. I think the best teachers I had...I don't know whether they were gifted or not, but they at least had the ability to understand who I was, and I think that, as I talk through this and understand more, maybe they were, so they understood some of what I was going through. And some of those, who were, for lack of a better word, regular teachers, they'd gone up and been smart, but they weren't at that next level. Those are the ones that I ran roughshod over and just bullied. Yeah, teachers who teach gifted kids need to be gifted. My wife was telling me about a teacher in her school who's teaching the gifted students, and she's teaching a course, where she's not teaching the math part of it because she doesn't like math. When I hear stories like that, I tell my wife, God help me if anyone ever put me on the school board or put me in charge of the school,

because I'd tear the place upside down. I'd probably alienate the kids who really need the help because of the way I think. Kids like me, I'd take all of them out and stick them in their own classroom. One of the things I hear through the grapevine is that for the gifted and advanced students, if you're not making an A or a B, you make a C, we're taking you out of the program. So if I make a C in a gifted and talented class, so I'm an average GT kid. One of the things they're teaching is about A's, B's, C's, D's. A is excellent, B is good, C is average, D is below average, F is failing. So if I make a C that means I'm an average gifted and talented student; what the hell's wrong with that? That still makes me smarter than half the other kids! They hadn't started that; those discussions started in high school. I couldn't believe it, I said, "You're going to take me out of the GT program if I don't make an A or a B. That's the most stupid thing I can think of!" I mean. I wasn't making the grade I was making because of... whatever. Okay, so if I made a C, it was an average of everything else we were doing. It probably means I only did average work, but not what I was capable of, if I even did it. So that's one concept I hear about that that I think ...if you've identified a child as gifted and he has all the factors, whatever you want to define those factors as, don't punish the kid if he doesn't make the grades, because chances are if he's not making the grades, in my opinion, it's because the teacher sucks. And I can see why those teachers would take offense at those comments, because they think, well, I'm not a bad teacher. Well, maybe you are, but not for some kids. Oh, hell no; not all teachers are good for all kids!

Parting thoughts

Research conducted in the life story tradition yields a plethora of detailed information, and this is evident even before analysis of the data has been completed. Narratives exemplify the phenomenon under study, yielding stories that hold readers' interest and contain pathos, humor, anger, and the full range of human emotions and experiences. Triangulation results in additional material to be added. Reporting of results should logically include both the narratives and the findings resulting from their analysis, but this poses a problem for publication. Most journals have limitations on length of articles, yet qualitative research of this nature yields bushels of data.

In the case of my initial dissertation study, *Stories of Success: Self-Interventions of Gifted Underachievers* (Flint, 2002), conversations with several journal editors at that time indicated it might be wise to include selected portions of the study in separate articles, rather than attempt to cover the work in one lengthy paper. Life-story research is becoming more common in helping us understand facets of the human experience. While the length of these qualitative studies has traditionally been a drawback, researchers, authors, editors, and publishers, particularly online, are beginning to find ways to preserve the integrity of the research by publishing entire studies instead of excerpts. Several journals, books, research centers, and publishers focus exclusively on life story collection and dissemination. These include Jossellson and Lieblich's *Narrative Study of Lives* series, available through

SAGE Publications, and Atkinson's Center for the Study of Lives, among others.

Each narrative constructed from a participant's life story contains a wealth of firsthand information about the lived

experience of one person who chronically underachieved. Each also teaches us valuable lessons about how to help people move toward happier, more productive, and fulfilled lives. ❖

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