

Examining the Influence of Teacher-Constructed and Student-Constructed Assignments on the Achievement Patterns of Gifted and Advanced Sixth-Grade Students

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This study examined the relationship of different assignment structures (i.e., teacher-constructed and student-constructed) on the achievement patterns of 6th-grade gifted and advanced students in a Southwest suburban school. Through a descriptive case study design (Berg, 2004; Merriam, 1988), an action research approach (Stringer, 2004) and self-study methods, the teacher-researcher explored student perception of control, and its influence on motivation (i.e., achieving and underachieving performance patterns) for different assignment structures. Findings indicate that gifted underachievers and advanced underachievers, alike, preferred the student-constructed assignment structure and self-assessment. The majority of gifted achievers and advanced achievers preferred the student-constructed assignment structure as well; however, they were evenly divided on their preference of the teacher assessment and the self-assessment.

Teacher-Researcher Narrative

As a middle school teacher of gifted and talented students, I have been perplexed by how some of the potentially brightest students do not perform well academically. Through reflective practice on instructional ideas, improvement for optimizing learning opportunities for all learners is of central

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concern. Although most of my students' learning needs are met, the nagging concern regarding low-performing, low-achieving students persist. How do I reach them? How can I present instructional activities or assignments that intrinsically motivate them to realize their potential and create their own learning excellence? This pedagogical concern set the stage for research on my own practice, using assignments and assessments as data sources, but crafting them to reveal student perceptions that would yield insight to their preferences, motivations, and passions.

Introduction

This study examines the influence of differing assignment structures (i.e., teacher-constructed and student-constructed) on the achievement patterns of sixth-grade gifted and advanced students (identified for the purpose of this study as gifted achievers, gifted underachievers, advanced achievers, and advanced underachievers) in a Southwest suburban school district. All students in this study were in a school district program that supports gifted and potentially gifted or advanced learners. The core of learners in the program was identified as gifted and talented during elementary school through a variety of identification tools (e.g., COGAT, teacher checklist, referrals). Additional learners in the program are comprised of high achievers or advanced students who have been screened for eligibility using a matrix of scores on standardized tests and school achievement (i.e., the reading component scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test).

For the purpose of this study, gifted underachievers and advanced underachievers were identified through teacher-researcher comparison of discrepancies between individual academic grades, standardized test scores, and in-class observations of student-demonstrated potential, ability, and performance during activities; discussions; and high student-interest assignments (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982). Additionally, one student was identified as a specific type of underachiever— a *selective consumer*.

Through the melding of a descriptive case study design (Berg, 2004; Merriam, 1988), an action research approach (Stringer, 2004), critical ethnography data analysis (Carspecken, 1996), and self-study methods and inspiration, the teacher-researcher explored student perception of control and its influence on motivation and achievement for different assignment structures. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of students' perceptions of control in their learning and assignment structures on their achievement and motivation. The following questions directed the research focus of the study: How might teacher-constructed and student-constructed assignment structures affect achieving and underachieving performance patterns? How do the following types of students respond to the aforementioned assignment structures: gifted achievers, advanced achievers, gifted underachievers, and advanced underachievers?

Literature Review

Some learning and instructional theories regard student control over instruction as influential in promoting appeal, effectiveness, and motivation (Klein & Keller, 1990). This is particularly true for gifted students who question the relevance of what is being taught—needing control to fuel internal motivation. On the other hand, less confident students may not function well under this shift in control. These students are desirous of external motivation—namely teacher-constructed instruction, goals, and assessment tools—in order to produce quality work. Dweck and Leggett (1988) refer to these contrasting student behaviors as helpless and performance-oriented behaviors. They conclude that the helpless student avoids challenges, seeking the familiar in an attempt to show proficiency, rather than pursue learning goals that encompass risk and a threat of failure. Mastery-oriented students, on the other hand, are those who are desirous of taking risks and view failure as a challenge rather than the embodiment of defeat.

Research by Ames and Archer (1988) reported that one underlying problem of student motivation and achievement lies in the individual student's perception of achievement goals in the classroom. Their study found that students who perceive emphasis on mastery

goals preferred learning challenges and exhibited a stronger belief that success follows with effort, whereas students perceiving performance goals within class activities and assignments were more likely to focus on ability, evaluation of work, and have a tendency to believe failure was due to lack of ability. If a student perceives assignments and assessments, then, as attacks on ability, it is understandable that the child may perform poorly due to fear of failure or chose to not perform at all, thus avoiding evaluation altogether. This may be especially salient to underachieving students.

Underachievement has been defined in research as a discrepancy between a child's academic performance and some ability index, such as an IQ score or a standardized test (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Rimm, 1995; Schultz, 2002; Supplee, 1990; Whitmore, 1980). Delisle and Galbraith suggested that contextual influences and situational complexities are the crux of underachievement. There are numerous causes linked to underachievement: low self-esteem, lack of task commitment, perfectionism, and boredom (Peterson & Colangelo, 1996). Additionally, one contributing factor to underachievement centers on student perception of control and choice in their learning environment (Klein & Keller, 1990).

Curriculum may manifest underachievement through a mismatch between student learning styles and pedagogical styles when no allowances are made for student expression and creativity (Baker, Bridger, & Evans, 1998). Numerous instructional designs and models have been fashioned to reverse the patterns of underachievement, some successful, others less so. Whitmore (1980) acknowledged that the curriculum in most school districts is largely textbook based, targeting the average student. Whitmore added, "Often gifted students do not find the content stimulating, challenging, or relevant to their interests" (p. 153). Delisle and Galbraith (2002) encapsulated influences of underachievement as "... content and situation specific" (p. 170). This viewpoint helps diminish the negative connotation that underachievement implies by looking at the individual child and addressing his or her needs based on the curricular issues and the situation at hand. Reis and McCoach (2000) contended that students who consciously refuse to perform at a level below their ability "... may actually demonstrate courage" (p. 161) by not settling or "buying into" a required curriculum that fails to challenge their learning

needs and goals. Without addressing inadequacies in the curriculum, these students are set up for a vicious cycle of failure. Delisle and Galbraith (2002) expounded, “. . . underachievement is learned because it is taught so well, year after year” (p. 173).

Furthermore, Delisle and Galbraith (2002) identified the following characteristics exemplified in most underachieving students: (a) they possess a poor academic self-concept, are psychologically at-risk, and tend to withdraw; and (b) they are usually dependent in nature and reactive, needing structure and imposed limits, and many gifted underachievers are perfectionists by nature. Conversely, Delisle (1992) claimed that gifted underachievers exhibiting nonproducing behaviors are mentally healthy, independent, and proactive with the tendency to rebel. Nonproducers are underachieving students who exhibit nearly total control of their academic lives but choose not to perform (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Similar to nonproducers are selective consumers, students who exhibit interest in at least one area and will therefore perform to a degree and experience some school success (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Delisle and Galbraith extended this view of the selective consumer gifted underachiever through the following observations: (a) their performance varies relative to the content and/or teacher; (b) they require little structure and need breathing room; and (c) they are the students who will verbally demand the relevance of the curriculum and its importance to their lives. By exploring students' perceptions of achievement goals and the impact of perceptions of control in learning experiences through assignment structures, student performance and achievement can be more closely examined.

As educators, awareness should be heightened to students' perceptions of achievement goals—mastery or performance—and their impact on achievement and, equally important, understand the impact of learners' perceptions of control in instruction. By exploring achievement goals, the classroom climate they foster, and assignments structures, educators can become more aware of the link between student perception of control and student performance. Therefore, this study examined student achievement and perception of control through two inherently different assignment structures—teacher-constructed and student-constructed.

Background and Design of the Study

All students in this study were enrolled in the gifted and talented program at a middle school in a Southwest suburban school district. The program was comprised of identified gifted students and advanced students of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds who have shown high achievement in several academic areas. This study included 54 sixth-grade students enrolled in the teacher-researcher's language arts classes. Of the 54 students, 25 are identified as gifted and talented. Eight of these gifted students fit into the category of underachiever, although one exhibited characteristics indicative of a selective consumer. Twenty-nine students were advanced students not identified as gifted. Seven of the nonidentified advanced students exhibited underachieving patterns, and the remainder of the students, both gifted and nonidentified advanced students, exhibited patterns of achievement, both average and high achievement. Through the course of study, a deeper understanding of the 15 identified underachieving students (8 gifted and 7 advanced) and 1 gifted selective consumer revealed a more accurate identification of some of the participants (i.e., verification of gifted underachiever as selective consumer).

Over a 6-week period, sixth-grade gifted and advanced students engaged in a variety of language arts activities through the reading of *Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson (1980). *Jacob Have I Loved* is set in the Chesapeake Bay in the 1940s. The novel's main character, Sara Louise Bradshaw, feels overshadowed by her seemingly perfect twin, Caroline. The novel is told from Louise Bradshaw's point of view and chronicles her painful journey to discovering herself, breaking free of the island where she feels trapped, and letting go of years of resentment. She finally comes into her own in the hills of Kentucky, where she serves her isolated community as a midwife.

For the teacher-constructed assignment, the students were given a teacher-created essay guideline and assessment rubric as a cumulative project reflecting on the themes and symbols from the novel (see Appendix A). As part of the assessment, the students completed a self-evaluation indicating their comfort level with the assignment structure and the assessment tool (viz., on a scale of 1–5, 5 indicating *completely comfortable* and 1 indicating *uncomfortable*, “How would you rate your

comfort level on this assignment? Explain; and, If you could change anything about this assignment, what would it be and why?”).

A similar sequence was repeated in the next assignment; however, the students were given freedom in their instructional goals and in the evaluation of them. For the student-constructed assignment, students were directed to create a project demonstrating a personal connection to the novel and identify criteria most important for evaluating their project (see Appendix B). They could use any self-selected medium and format. The student-constructed assignment also included a self-evaluation and comfort-scale rating (a summary chart of the assignment comfort-scale rating [see Table 1]). Finally, students completed a summative reflection of open-ended questions on the two assignments and assessment structures, comparing their receptivity of the different assignment designs and assessment formats (e.g., “Which assignment was the most difficult for you? Which assignment were you most proud of and why?”; see Appendix C).

Methods

A descriptive case study was utilized to investigate the influence of students’ perceptions of control in their learning and assignment structure—teacher-constructed and student-constructed—on achieving and underachieving performance patterns. Merriam (1988) described this form of qualitative research as useful when description and explanation are the aim, “when it is not possible or feasible to manipulate the potential causes of behavior, and when variables are not easily identified or are too embedded in the phenomenon to be extracted from the study” (p. 7). The inductive nature of this design allowed insight, speculation, discovery, and interpretation through the coding of collected data (Merriam, 1988); furthermore, Berg (2004) illustrated the value of the case study design: “It can easily serve as the breeding ground for insights and even hypotheses that may be pursued in subsequent studies” (p. 258). The research design was influenced by both action research methodology and self-study, in that the teacher-researcher is inherently curious about the effects, within her own pedagogy, that assignment structure may have on student motivation and learning, and the learners of this study were actively involved in the research

Table 1
Student Preferences of Teacher-Constructed and Student-Constructed Assignment-Structure and Assessment-Structure Reflection Results on “Most Appealing” (N = 54)

	Number of Students	Teacher-Constructed	Student-Constructed	Teacher-Assessment	Self-Assessment
Gifted Achiever	17	3	14	8	9
Gifted Underachiever	8	0	8	2	6
Advanced Achiever	22	6	16	11	11
Advanced Underachiever	7	0	7	0	7

Note. After completing all assignments, students were asked to select which assignment structure was most appealing for them to complete (i.e., teacher-constructed or student-constructed). They also were asked which assessment was most appealing to them (i.e., teacher constructed or student-constructed). The table presents a tally of this choice based upon the “type” of student responding to these questions.

process through member checks. According to Stringer (2004) with respect to effective teaching, reflective teachers “wish to learn from it, and consciously engage in cycles of observation, reflection, and new action—conscious trial and error—to improve their practice” (p. 44). The nature of data collection in this study parallels an action research approach in that students’ direct responses to the assignment structure were queried by the teacher-researcher as a member check process. Although not an ethnographic study, critical ethnography methodology was utilized to analyze students’ written responses (narrative data). This methodological approach lends itself to qualitative investigation of “features of human life and human experience that are not overtly political” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 2) and employs analysis techniques that are applicable to universal qualitative studies.

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of each assignment structure’s project, student reflections and self-evaluations through written responses were ana-

lyzed to determine the relationship or influence of each structure on each type of student. Student reflections for each assignment and assessment structure were coded according to themes, concepts, and semantics (Carspecken, 1996). To ensure validity of data analysis, an external coder, the university research partner of the study, initially conducted the data analysis by generating meaning fields from student writings, where the teacher-researcher served as peer-debriefer in this process. Meaning fields are text reconstructed into objective, subjective, and normative-evaluative statements (ontological categories) that reveal validity, value, identity, and truth claims. To put it simply, this process involves interpreting and identifying multiple possible meanings of the students' shared written responses. The teacher-researcher then reviewed the reconstructed statements and claims to conduct a hermeneutic inference process in analyzing the data. The hermeneutic process involves intersubjectivity (subjective position-taking from a variety of perspectives on the act), consideration of cultural typifications and generalities, normative reflection, and consideration of personality factors (Carspecken, 1996). Basically, this aspect of the data analysis process entails holistically viewing the data through the eyes of the participant. The university research partner served as peer-debriefer for the hermeneutic inference process, questioning premises and conjectures in a devil's advocate role. Peer-debriefing helps unearth researcher bias and unexamined assumptions during data analysis.

As part of the reconstructive data analysis, low-level (little abstraction) and high-level (analytical emphases) codes were thematically categorized to identify patterns. Throughout the study, the teacher-researcher employed member checks with participants to verify validity of interpreted data (specifically, identified patterns). Through probing questions, students were asked to clarify what they meant by certain statements. This study reports the patterns identified in student responses in determining which assignment structure and assessment were most appealing to each type of student.

At the conclusion of each assignment structure's project, student reflections were analyzed through the same reconstruction process to determine the relationship between control of assignment structure on achievement of each type of student—the gifted achiever, gifted underachiever, advanced achiever, and advanced underachiever.

Shaughnessy and Zechmeister (as cited in Berg, 2004) identified one significant aspect in case studies—they generate hypotheses and formulate questions that can be pursued with further research. Schultz (2002) expounded that exploratory research is initiated by the classroom teacher to alter an apparent area of concern—concern grounded in practicality, not theory. In this study, findings were thematically categorized, searching for patterns that may, in turn, generate more questions that will require further research and analysis.

Discussion of data findings on student reflections in the subsequent sections presents more depth of discussion of student perceptions between teacher-constructed and student-constructed assignments.

Findings

Teacher-Constructed Assignment Reflection

Student reflections on the teacher-constructed assignment and assessment tool revealed four distinct themes with regard to student perception of the assignment's content, its assessment tool, and recommendations for change. Differing themes that emerged from the reflections on teacher-constructed assignments were student desire for *flexibility, ease of task, substance, and comfort*.

Flexibility. Most of the students whose responses supported this theme sought to answer the teacher-constructed essay question they felt lent itself to the most discussion. One common thread woven through the responses of those who sought flexibility was the quantity of knowledge they felt their essay choice yielded. This desire for “the most bang for your buck” is exhibited in the following gifted underachiever's reflection: “I picked essay question #2 because I thought it was the one I could write the most about.” This student was obviously focused on the goal of completing the assignment with the essay that would most fulfill the teacher-given objective. This gifted underachiever did complete the task and wrote a tremendous essay, but it was turned in a week late, as are most of her major

assignments. This student appears to be a perfectionist and lacking in confidence of her abilities. Another gifted achiever desired flexibility in the task but took the assignment a step further through his reflection: “I chose essay #3 because I wanted to write about how Louise’s childhood helped her be prepared for Truitt.” Although adding the example may seem minor, the depth of the aforementioned response demonstrates a more personalized connection with the novel being studied. Another level of response is exemplified in the following advanced achiever’s reflection, which demonstrated internalization of the assignment:

I picked essay number 2 because I knew almost everything I was going to write about. I knew it wouldn’t take me a long time to write the essay and finish my web. The book gave a lot of quotes for the type of essay I chose.

Ironically, one student identified as an advanced underachiever showed tremendous process-goal orientation—desire to acquire knowledge over favorable judgment—in his following reflection: “I addressed #3 because it looked challenging and difficult with a simple subject. It looked about my style.” This student, although failing two subjects, appears to value the competence gained from the assignment as more valuable than a numerical score.

Ease of Task. For the most part, the students who sought to ease the complexity of the task chose an essay topic that they knew well and were not challenged by. These students’ goal orientation leaned significantly toward task-completion (performance oriented; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). One identified advanced underachiever demonstrates this through the following reflection: “[I chose essay] number 2. I thought it was the easiest one, since you almost already know it all.” The student mentions “ease” and “knowing it all” as indicators of success in dealing with the teacher-constructed assignment. Another student, a gifted underachiever, uses humor to soften his disinterest with the assignment: “I chose the one that you had to describe why Joseph W. said that Louise was suited for the valley. I chose it because it would be short but fun. APRIL FOOLS!!! It was boring.” The student chose the essay topic that he felt would minimize the workload. Another student, an advanced achiever, adds depth to his reflection

in the following: “I decided on number 1 because I thought it would be the easiest for me to do. I feel like I work well with insights, and I felt comfortable with this choice.” This student composed a stellar composition but was not stretched by the assignment. This student may fear failure or may view taking a chance with a less known essay choice as too risky.

Substance. Students who desired depth and substance from the assignment chose an essay question they valued as personally meaningful. These students formed connections with the literature to their own lives. They looked past the assignment at hand and found relevance and personal meaning for themselves. Some of the connections these students made were as follows: “I enjoy comparing and explaining peoples’ personalities. And when you go in depth, you really begin to understand and know the person.” For this student, the focus of the assignment was not with the task at hand but on its relevance and meaning. This student internally constructed meaning from the task to her own life—basing the essay choice on what she found personally fulfilling. This student fits in the category of a gifted underachiever, yet turned the assignment into a learning goal, an opportunity to increase her competence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The task at hand was not even mentioned by this particular student, just the need to connect and find value through the literature to her own life. Likewise, another student, an advanced achiever, made similar connections through the reflection regarding her essay choice:

I chose the first essay. I chose this essay because this essay followed Louise. You could really relate to her. Throughout the book Louise told/showed her feelings. Also, you could not understand why she felt that way. Louise understands why Caroline gets more attention and feels as if she turned it into a lie.

When prompted to explain what she meant by “feels as if she turned it into a lie,” the student wrote the following response: “Louise thinks her parents like Caroline more, which is not true.”

Comfort. Several student reflections pointed to the need for comfort in ability level and the desire for minimal challenge with the expe-

rience. Dweck and Leggett (1988) also lumped these students into performance-goal orientation due to the fact that these students more highly regard the completion of the task at hand and connected grade superior to the knowledge gained from a less “comfortable” assignment. Student responses with this theme varied by degree of desired comfort; however, a commonality these individuals displayed was an intense need to accomplish the objective at hand without risk of failure. The message of seeking comfort is deafening in the following statements: “I chose 2 because I usually have more to write about when I compare things. I also knew that I didn’t understand 3 in the book, so it might be difficult.” This student is a gifted achiever by academic standards; however, her desire for knowledge and challenge appears secondary to task completion through this assignment structure. This particular student sought external structure to assignments rather than self-directed structure as evident in the following: “I didn’t like having so much free range. I had a really hard time thinking of what to do.” She feared judgment of work produced (both external and self-assessment) as shared in this quote: “I don’t like to use any type of rubric. Usually, because I go *insane* thinking that I didn’t do something correctly.” The student clarifies that comment with: “I only want to know the types of things I will be graded on.”

Another student, an advanced achiever, echoes the previous sentiment: “I chose the first essay question because I thought I could write the most about it. The first essay question was the question I understood the most.” No challenge, no sweat, no fear of failure—these students seek accomplishment of performance but lack the desire for substance in their given assignment.

The next student, a gifted achiever, appears to combine the themes of ease of task with comfort in the following statement: “I chose essay #1. On my chart I had enough information to make a complete essay. I could use the rubric when I was stuck.” This robotic response shows no internalization of the given assignment or a connection to the task. This student appears to weigh his performance so highly that he has lost sight of the assignment’s value altogether.

Student-Constructed Assignment Reflection

Two themes became apparent upon the reflection of the student-constructed assignment. Some students embraced their newfound freedom and plunged confidently into ambiguity, whereas others huddled near one another and their teacher, asking a multitude of questions and demanding structure. When asked how they would change the student-constructed project, students responded in the following two categories: those who craved *structure* and those who sought *freedom* of choice.

Structure. Although many of the students in this category enjoyed the project they created, their responses indicate that the open-ended nature of the assignment was outside their comfort level. One advanced achiever, whose project was highly creative, proposed the following: “Give us something to work with because some kids find it hard to come up with an idea.” Another student, a gifted achiever, explained how she would change the assignment in the following reflection: “I would give choices for us to do instead of thinking of it on our own. I would also make it a group project.” The open-ended nature of the assignment left this usually confident student unsure of how to best tackle the task at hand. Similarly, another achieving student suggested: “I would change the fact that you could do anything you want because sometimes you can have a subject that kind of doesn’t fit with the book.”

When asked what she discovered about herself as a learner from this project, one student who sought structure wrote: “I discovered that the subject that I did wasn’t really true in my household and my entire lifestyle.” This gifted achiever’s project compared her experiences with her sister to Louise’s experiences with Caroline. She internalized the assignment and made the connection that although she and her sister fight, she will greatly miss her in 2 years when she leaves for college. In a similar way, one advanced achiever reflected: “I would give brief suggestions that may help the students get some ideas.” And when reflecting on what he learned about himself from this assignment, he wrote: “I never really thought about why I annoyed my sister and then after doing this project (an essay on sibling rivalry) I figured out why I annoyed my sister and why she annoyed me.”

Overall, the reflections from the students who desired structure were predominately from the gifted achievers and advanced achievers.

Freedom. Many students found the open-ended nature of the student-constructed assignment to be the most rewarding. Many of these students indicated that this freedom of choice allowed them to fully engage their talents and their interests into a novel that a few of them initially felt little or no connection with. One gifted achiever, whose project was a poster-sized rollercoaster that plunged, rose, and looped depending on the circumstance Louise was faced with, made the following observation on rating himself on a comfort scale of 1–5: “5 [*completely comfortable*] because I got to choose what I wanted to do.”

Another student drew from her talents and strengths through this assignment structure: “I wanted to do something I had experience in, so I would know what to do. I like to draw, decorate, and paint, so doing a life graph was perfect.” When reflecting on what she learned about herself as a learner, she made this observation:

During this project, I saw how Louise had misunderstood so many events. If she had looked from Caroline, Call, or her parents’ point of view, she could have been happier. I will try to see things from another person’s point of view more.

This gifted achiever apparently internalized the themes from the novel and has begun the process of self-actualization.

One gifted underachiever easily connected with this assignment structure in the following reflection: “I would rate it a 5 [*completely comfortable*] because I am very comfortable acting in front of my fellow peers. The whole assignment was fun. We got to be someone different for the day; I had a blast.” And when asked what she would change about the assignment structure, she wrote:

I would not change anything. This project gave us a very wide range to look at. We could do an essay, a skit, a talk show, even a puppet show. We were able to show our talents and our uniqueness. We were able to have fun.

Another gifted underachiever found the freedom of this assignment structure refreshing but made harsh judgments in regard to his

perceived ability. He reflected: “I liked having it by my rules, except my project wasn’t good enough. It needed more umph.” When asked to explain what he discovered about himself as a learner from the project, he said: “I can think of stuff, but I can’t do the things I think of.” This “helpless” response indicates that this student may view his difficulties, as Dweck and Leggett (1988) theorized, “as failures, as indicative of low ability, and as insurmountable” (p. 258).

Summary

Overall, students who desired flexibility in the teacher-constructed assignment were representative of all four student categories, although the advanced achiever and advanced underachiever tended to focus their essay choice solely on the essay question they felt they knew best. On the other hand, the gifted achiever and gifted underachiever tended to internalize their choice and make deeper connections with the material—personal connections with the academic task. Klein and Keller (1990) reported numerous research findings that indicate when students who possess an internal locus of control are given control over their instruction they are more successful than their counterparts who possess an external locus of control. Both the advanced underachiever and the gifted underachiever were desirous of ease of task. These students demonstrate a “helpless pattern” that Dweck and Leggett (1988) characterized as “an avoidance to challenge and a deterioration of performance in the face of obstacles” (p. 256). The one advanced achiever who sought this ease of task interestingly chose the essay that the rest of the class found to be the most challenging. All four categories of students were represented in those who desired substance in the teacher-constructed assignment, although the gifted students—both advanced and underachieving—comprised the majority of this category. They tended to make their choice based on the essay they found as personally meaningful. In the area of comfort, both the gifted achiever and the advanced achiever chose the essay they felt would lend them the most success. Dweck and Leggett (1988) identified this focus on task completion and avoidance of challenge and potential failure as performance-goal oriented.

The student-constructed assignment revealed two contrasting themes—structure and freedom. Gifted achievers and advanced achievers both desired structure. They tended to be overwhelmed when the control of instruction was shifted. Klein and Keller (1990) cited research findings that indicate “externals perform better under conditions of more structure” (p. 141). Their research also found that students who exhibit this external locus of control tend to be happier and more successful when teachers were in control of their instruction (Klein & Keller, 1990). Conversely, gifted achievers and gifted underachievers preferred freedom in their instruction. They relished the opportunity to be trusted in their learning and to reveal their talents and areas of expertise. Perlmutter and Monty, as cited by Klein and Keller (1990), noted that the “‘mere illusion of control’ significantly improves motivation and performance” (p. 140). See Table 1 for a summary of student receptivity to specific assignment structure.

The students identified as underachievers were unanimous in their desire for control over their own instruction. Even 30 of the 39 achieving students found the student-constructed assignment more appealing than the teacher-constructed assignment. However, the difference regarding the two assessment structures points to the depth of control the underachieving students demand. Most of the achievers, both gifted and advanced, preferred complete control over how their performance would be assessed, whereas only half of the achieving students, both gifted and advanced, preferred the self-assessment structure.

The results indicate a unanimous preference for self-selection with both the gifted underachievers and the advanced underachievers. The gifted achievers and advanced achievers, too, desired more control over their instruction; however, most desired either limitations in the student-assignment structure or more choices in the teacher-assignment structure. The most noticeable difference was evident in the assessment structure—teacher-evaluation and self-evaluation. The results of the study indicate that although most students sought more control over their instruction, the students facing underachieving patterns were most passionate in their reflections regarding their preference. Many of these students felt the freedom of the student-constructed assignment motivated them to use their creativity and strengths.

Concluding Thoughts

Gifted underachievers in this study appear to desire control of their instruction—choice and the opportunity to “call the shots.” Although many of the students in the study held this desire, for the gifted and advanced underachieving students, this control of instruction allowed for their success. The achievers completed their tasks with similar outcomes—varying degrees of success. The underachievers had difficulty with the teacher-constructed assignment, possibly, more specifically, to the assessment tool used to grade their work, because this represented “external review” of the completed assignments over which they had no control. One student, a selective consumer, did not even complete the teacher-constructed essay assignment. For this student, with respect to essay assignments, noncompletion was a recurring pattern in this class and in other content area classes as well. Through a member-check process, the student was queried from a nonjudgmental stance several times and presented multiple lengthy rationales, but never completed the assignment. This same student, though, for the student-constructed assignment, turned in a creative project of a timeline, color-coded by the emotions expressed by both female characters. His student-constructed product presents strong concrete evidence of his commitment to self-selected tasks and choice in assignment endeavors. He even chose to present his project to the class.

Peterson and Colangelo (1996) expressed concerns that for these students “their underachievement may represent great pain and frustration, not to mention loss of adult productivity” (p. 406). If “great pain and frustration” can be lessened by simply shifting control from teacher to student, then educators should be willing to hand over the reins.

It is quite possible that teacher-assignment structures that discount students’ interests may proliferate a cycle of underachieving behaviors. Reis and McCoach (2000) noted research findings that indicate “participants were most likely to develop achievement-oriented behaviors when they were stimulated in class and given the opportunity to pursue topics of interest to them” (p. 158). Furthermore, their research findings point to a need for change in the underachieving student’s curriculum and the classroom setting

for reversal in underachievement to take place. Delisle (2000) urged the following regarding curricular adjustments: “A stimulating school environment that is challenging and open-ended can be provided; strengths and interests that belong to the child can be acknowledged and encouraged within the classroom” (p. 257).

Limitations of the Study

The teacher-researcher recognizes several limitations of the study including the size of the population studied, homogeneity of the participants, content-specific parameters (language arts only), lack of historical data on students’ prior experiences with student-constructed assignments in other classes or other content areas, and the choice of product in the teacher-constructed assignment—an essay. Some of the achieving students’ fear of writing may have outweighed their fear of choice, as could be said of an underachieving student. The reverse, of course, is true as well—fear of freedom or control outweighing the fear of writing. Also, this study was based on only two assignments from one novel. Some students may not have cared for this particular novel, which would have influenced their comments and quality of their work. Additionally, a limitation is presented through the teacher creating the brief guidelines for the student-constructed assignment and assessment. Although the student-constructed assignment and assessments were designed to be open-ended with significantly more opportunities for student selection, choice, self-direction, and self-assessment, there exists embedded hegemony in the assignment itself, specifically in the summative reflection guided by teacher-constructed questions. These identified limitations can guide further research.

Implications for Teaching Practices: Practical Suggestions for Implementation

Based on the results of the study and the themes that emerged from the student reflections, the researchers, as teachers, have identified assignment-construction suggestions for practitioners.

Trust Students. Although not explicitly discussed in this study, the most creative, productive, and meaningful student products created were a result of the student-constructed assignments. Teachers can demonstrate flexibility in the learning environment and present opportunities for student freedom and choice by releasing their hegemonic hold on assignment structure. Inviting students to share ideas and self-create assignments and assessment rubrics, as co-collaborators in their studies, engages them at a higher level of learning. Students who balk at the openness of this freedom may gain experiential confidence and learn to trust their own judgment and skills through the teacher's initiated trust in their ability. The best instructional activities/ideas and learning goals do not come from textbooks, curriculum guides, veteran teachers, or researchers. Students serve as the premium source for generating optimal, authentic, and meaningful learning energy.

Provide Choices. Whether the assignment is teacher-constructed or student-constructed, elements of student choice must be provided to optimize effort, motivation, and achievement. Choices heighten the meaningfulness of assignments through a shifting of perceived "task" work to personal expressions of their learning and identity. Some students prefer a carte blanche approach, where others prefer choice from a list of options. Either way, there must be a balance in the learning choices provided in the classroom. Providing choice builds a student-centered environment where trust is reciprocated between teacher and student.

Develop a Facilitative Disposition. This control transfer in the classroom requires the teacher to take the position of facilitator. This shift to behind-the-scenes is not one of disconnection, but rather a move to become more of a *guide on the side*. By trusting students and providing choice, the teacher steps to the side, allowing students to grow and discover their capabilities. This naturally provides the teacher with the opportunity to direct and redirect the student as needed. Through student self-reflection and teacher reflection, a motivational avenue for learning is built. By taking the opportunity to ask a student a reflective question, such as "If you could change anything about this assignment, what would it be?," opens a dialogue between

teacher and student. This simple question empowers the student, thus giving the teacher and student the responsibility in allowing for that change to take place. Whitmore (1980) eloquently reflected on her experience of adjusting her teaching style to meet the emotional needs of her students. The following establishes the importance of sensitive teachers seeing past the child's low performance and meeting their vulnerabilities instead:

These gifted children had been very vulnerable to emotional disturbances because of their perceptions of having failed to meet the expectations of self or others, their tendencies to set unrealistically high goals, and their intense desires for perfection. That vulnerability was exacerbated by the individual's acute sensitivity to the responses, that is, the social feedback of others. It was easy for these children to feel rejected and valueless. (p. 129)

Practice Awareness Over Assumptions. To effectively meet students' learning needs with respect to motivation and achievement, a teacher needs to acquire an awareness of the students' inclinations and perspectives about learning, knowledge attainment, and personal learning goals. Additionally, the teacher must become aware of and address students' affective learning needs. Underachieving nonproducers may not respond to choices and emotional support or connection with the teacher or peers, whereas selective consumers would embrace specific teacher interactions. Do not assume that students do not complete work because they don't care. Even when a child presents an uncaring persona, dig deeper to find the fear or feeling of irrelevance that permeates that "I don't care" mantra.

Implications for Further Research

One area for further research could be in-depth examinations of the types of gifted underachievers, specifically regarding differences between nonproducers and selective consumers. The idea of a student who is a selective consumer choosing not to perform is different from a gifted underachieving student who does not produce because of perfectionism. Further research could comparatively examine learners' achievement patterns in other content areas (i.e., math, science, or

social studies) when presented with differing assignment structures. Additionally, the question is raised whether presenting the teacher-constructed assignment first, which required a narrow range of skills as a “writing only” assignment, may have negatively influenced subsequent student-constructed assignments. Did regurgitating an essay in order to please the teacher rather than constructing an assignment of genuine student interest influence the results? And lastly, a separate, follow-up study could include a group-constructed, group-assessed project to examine how socially constructed assignments and peer assessments influence achievement and motivation.

The need for teachers to understand the complexities of underachievement is critical to best meet the learning needs of these gifted students.

The main reason that underachievement “solutions” do not work in the long term is that the child is not invested in their success. If grades are raised, or punishment is lessened, it is because the child has decided to play the game to win back a privilege. But as soon as the restraints are loosened, the underachieving behaviors will return, unless somewhere along the line someone takes the time to ask a simple, two-part question: “What’s important to you, and how can I help you learn it?” (Delisle, 2000, p. 256)

Again, putting the child back in control of his or her learning is imperative for success to occur. As stated by Whitmore (1980), the gifted child “wants to share in decision making, to have choices, to plan and evaluate—to be self-directed” (p. 154).

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Appendix A

Teacher-Constructed Assignment and Assessment

Jacob Have I Loved
by Katherine Paterson (1980)

Objectives:

- The learner will analyze character traits, motives, and points of view in the text in order to make inferences and generalizations.
- The learner will compose a thesis statement and support the thesis with examples from the text.
- The learner will determine the purpose of his or her writing and select a form, voice, and style that are appropriate for the purpose and audience.

Prior to the Writing Assignment:

The students will read the novel *Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson, participate in group and class discussions, define vocabulary, conduct literature circle discussions, create characterization charts for each character, respond in their journals, and write a “Dear Abby” letter seeking advice.

Writing Assignment:

The student will choose one of the following essay topics listed below. The student will compose a thesis statement and use specific examples and quotations from *Jacob Have I Loved* to support the thesis statement. The essay will be comprised of a minimum of two pages.

1. Louise is haunted by the story of her and her twin sister, Caroline’s, birth. She faces her anger and resentment as an adult when she is responsible for the safe delivery of twins—their situation being identical to the birth of Louise and Caroline. Explain the insight gained by Louise in this experience and how it impacts her feelings toward her sister, her family, and herself.

2. At the beginning of the novel, Louise states, “I love Rass Island, although for much of my life I did not think I did, and it is a pure sorrow to me now that, once my mother leaves, there will be no one left with the name of Bradshaw. But there were only the two of us, my sister, Caroline, and me, and neither of us could stay.” Trace the sisters’ personalities, their dreams and aspirations, and their talents. Then explain how the island would not be able to meet their needs.
3. When Louise describes her life on Rass Island to Joseph Wojtkiewicz, he says, “God in heaven’s been raising you for this valley from the day you were born.” Find evidence in the beginning chapters of the novel that support his statement through descriptions of Louise’s childhood that show that she is well-suited for her adult life in the Appalachian Mountains.

**Rubric for *Jacob Have I Loved* Essay
(Write Source Expository Writing Rubric)**

<i>Ideas</i>	5-The essay is informative with clear reasoning, an in-depth knowledge of the text, and a clear focus. Quotations support the main ideas.	4-The essay is informative with a clear focus. More specific details are needed. More quotations are needed to support the main ideas.	3-The focus of the essay needs to be clearer and more specific details are needed. Limited use of quotations from the text.	2-The topic needs to be narrowed or expanded. Many more specific details are needed. Limited or no use of quotations.	1-The essay does not address the prompt.
<i>Organization</i>	5-The organization logically presents a smooth flow of ideas from beginning to end. Transitions build strong connections.	4-The essay contains a beginning, middle, and an end. Transitions are used.	3-The beginning or ending is weak. The middle needs to support the focus of the essay. Limited use of transitions.	2-The beginning, middle, and end exist. Transitions are needed.	1-The beginning, middle, and end run together. The organization is unclear. The reader is easily lost.

<i>Voice</i>	5-The writer's voice is confident, positive, and sounds informative. It fits the audience.	4-The writer's voice is well-informed most of the time and fits the audience.	3-The writer sometimes sounds unsure, and the voice needs to fit the audience better.	2-The writer sounds unsure. The voice and audience do not fit.	1-The writer's voice is unsure and weak. It indicated boredom or lack of knowledge on the given topic.
<i>Word Choice</i>	5-Strong, engaging, nouns and verbs contribute to the essay's clarity.	4-Some nouns and verbs could be more specific.	3-Too many general words are used.	2-General or missing words make the essay difficult to understand.	1-The same weak verbs are used throughout the essay.
<i>Sentence Fluency</i>	5-The sentences flow smoothly. Sentence variety adds appeal to the essay and are fluent and rhythmic in structure.	4-Variety is seen in both the types of sentences and their beginnings.	3-Varied sentence beginnings are used. Sentence variety would make the essay more interesting to read.	2-Varied sentence beginnings are needed. Sentence variety would make the essay more interesting.	1-Most sentences begin the same way. Most of the sentences are simple. Ideas do not flow smoothly.
<i>Conventions</i>	5-The essay is free of errors.	4-Grammar and punctuation errors are few. The reader is not distracted by the errors.	3-Grammar and punctuation errors are seen in a few sentences. They distract the reader in those areas.	2-There are a number of errors and may confuse the reader.	1-Frequent errors make the essay difficult to read.

Self-Evaluation

1. Which essay question did you address and why did you make that choice?
2. Did the assessment tool aide in the completion of your essay?

3. On a scale of 1–5 (5 indicating completely comfortable and 1 indicating uncomfortable), how would you rate your comfort level on this assignment? Explain.
4. If you could change anything about this assignment, what would it be and why?

Appendix B

Student-Constructed Assignment and Assessment

Jacob Have I Loved
by Katherine Paterson (1980)

Upon the completion of the novel and completion of the culminating essay, the student will construct an assignment based on the following criteria:

- Create a project demonstrating a personal connection to the novel. Use any self-selected medium; use any format.

Students will also complete the following project prospectus and an assessment tool:

Project Prospectus
(From Simmons, 1999, p. 11)

Purpose~ Explain what you want to demonstrate by completing this project, and show how your project relates to the book.

Audience~ Include a brief description of who your audience will be, what its members are likely to know about your subject, how you plan to help them understand your project, and how you plan to capture their interest.

Project Description~ Give a brief overview of the content and format of your project.

Materials/Resources Needed~ Summarize any equipment and materials you will need and explain where you will get them. Also list any resources you plan to use.

Points to consider in project evaluation~ What are the main ideas you are trying to communicate in your project? Identify the criteria that are most important for evaluating your project.

Student Self-Evaluation

1. How did you come up with the idea for your project?
2. Did the assessment tool you created aide in the completion of your project?
3. Did the project turn out the way you imagined it would?
4. On a scale of 1–5 (5 indicating *completely comfortable* and 1 indicating *uncomfortable*), how would you rate your comfort level on this assignment? Explain.
5. If you could change anything about this assignment, what would it be and why?
6. What did you discover about yourself, as a learner, from this project?

Appendix C Essay and Project Evaluation

You were given two culminating assignments for the novel *Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson (1980). One assignment required you to choose an essay topic and complete a two-page essay, including adding quotations from the novel to support your ideas. The other assignment required you to create a project of your own based on a theme from the novel, the relationship between the title and the story, or the analysis of character growth and symbolism. Please answer the questions below. You may add any additional insights or comments on the back of your sheet.

1. Of the two assignments, which one did you find the most enjoyable? Why?
2. Which assignment was the most difficult? What aspects were difficult for you? What frustrated you?

3. How did you feel evaluating your own project? Which evaluation appealed most to you—your self-evaluation or the teacher-created essay rubric?
4. How did you feel about the rubric used to evaluate your essay?
5. Which assignment were you most proud of and why?
6. How would you have changed the assignment structure you least liked?
7. How would you improve the assignment structure you most enjoyed?