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Factors that predict underachievement in Hispanic gifted students

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FACTORS THAT PREDICT UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN HISPANIC GIFTED STUDENTS

A Thesis

by

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IN HISPANIC GIFTED STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that predict underachieving gifted students. The participants were 44 Hispanic gifted students enrolled in the 8th grade from 3 different junior high and middle schools in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. The following were used as independent variables: parental influence, motivation, self-concept, attitude, self-perceptions, and goal motivation. The dependent variable was dichotomous, achiever or underachiever. The School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised and the Parent Influence Survey were the instruments used to collect the data. Analysis was done using the logistic regression model. The results show that attitude towards school was the only predictor; it predicted underachievers with an accuracy of 70.6%, achievers with 85.2%. The overall accuracy was 79.5%.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The problem of underachieving students plagues parents, teachers, and counselors alike. It is estimated that between 10% and 20% of high school dropouts possess high ability, and that 10% to 15% of students in general are performing academically at a level significantly lower than they are capable of achieving (Johnson, Saccuzzo & Guertin, 1994). More disturbing is the problem of underachieving gifted students: "There is something unusually tragic about losing the potential abilities of a future great leader or scientist or artist to the society" (Gallagher, 1990, p.221). Because of their potential to make astounding contributions, it would be a disservice to our society not to cultivate the talents of these gifted children.

Identifying underachieving gifted students is not a simple task, but certainly one that must be undertaken. The loss of the potential of these individuals is often overlooked simply because the little effort they put out is still enough to satisfy minimum requirements (Johnson, Sacuzzo, & Guertin, 1994). A difficulty encountered in identifying underachieving gifted students is that underachievement is viewed differently by different people. For instance, a grade of 70 may be considered satisfactory to some while others think that anything below 80 is a sign of underachievement (Deslisle & Berger, 1990). Typically a student is considered to be

underachieving when there is a discrepancy of 16 points or more between the score on an IQ test and academic performance (Lopez, 2002). However, there is no single, universally accepted definition for an underachieving gifted student, but rather numerous definitions that share some things in common (Reis & McCoach, 2000).

For the purpose of this study, a student is identified as an underachiever if he or she failed to master all the objectives as presented in the *Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Test*, better known as TAAS.

The majority of the research has focused on the differences among three groups: underachieving gifted students, achieving gifted students and achieving students; however, most of these studies have been qualitative, clinical, or some form of a case study (McCoach & Siegle, 2001). In the past, studies have looked at race and ethnicity as a variable that may cause underachievement; many of these studies have concluded that it does influence underachievement (Baldwin, 1987 and Ford & Thomas, 1997).

Most of the research on Hispanic gifted students has concentrated with the identification process; moreover, no studies found on the Eric Digests or Psych Info databases have been found that deal with the underachievement of Hispanic gifted students. This empirical study looks specifically at Hispanic gifted students in the Rio Grande Valley, a minority group that has not been the subject of many studies. It is important in that it adds new knowledge to the field of gifted education.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research has identified a variety of factors that may contribute to underachievement, including influence of family dynamics, motivation, self-concept, and attitude.

Underachievement and Family Dynamics

Studies on family dynamics have yielded contradictory results. Some show that the family has a negative effect on children, others a positive effect. In cases where the underachieving child comes from a dysfunctional family it is unknown whether the child is a cause of or a result of the breakdown of the family unit (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Wood, Chapin, and Hannah (1988) who performed a qualitative study on the relationship of family environment and underachievement, concluded that the family environment plays a big role in the academic success of a child.

Children whose parents hold high academic expectations of them seem to perform better in school than children whose parents hold low expectations. Also, children whose parents may verbally advocate high academic expectations but live lives of low achievers tend to negatively influence their children (Rimm & Lowe, 1988).

Parental educational level by itself does not seem to affect children's achievement. Ford's (1997) study of minority gifted students found no link between parental educational level and underachievement.

On the other hand, parenting styles play an important role in molding a child's achievement pattern. Children who come from a home where parents are too restrictive, punish excessively, or are too lenient tend to be low achievers (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Extremely restrictive homes do not foster learning for the gifted child. Gifted children need to be in an environment that is flexible. They need to be encouraged and given opportunities to question. Parents must refrain from domination of their children (Deslisle & Berger, 1990). Gallagher's (1991) case study of a student named JOE, exemplifies the consequences of an environment that pressures gifted children. Although JOE exhibits high performance on achievements tests, he does poorly in school. Despite the many attempts to motivate him by his family and even his teachers, he continues to do the absolute minimum. The more his father pressures him, the worse he does.

Another contributing factor of underachievement is inconsistent parenting. Inconsistency occurs when the roles that parents take become sharply defined. For example, in most families of underachievers one parent is the authoritarian and one parent functions as the protector, this inconsistency is aggravated if one parent begins to be too authoritarian or the other too protective (Reis & McCoach, 2000).

A study of minority gifted children found that Mexican-American families play a crucial role in molding a child because of the "extended family network". The family provides the child not only with socialization and culture but also with acceptance (Gallegos & Flores, 1982). The study also stated that there were problems with the function between minority families in relation to the child's school. One problem was that the parents had little or no training in identifying giftedness and dealing with the special needs of a gifted child (Gallegos & Flores, 1982).

Although family dynamics is a factor that has been linked to underachievement in gifted learners; it is outside the control of the individual. The role of self is also a factor that has been used to explain underachievement in gifted students, specifically self-motivation, self-concept, and attitude.

Underachievement and the Role of Self-Motivation, Self-Concept and Attitude

Self-motivation, self-concept, and attitude have been found to be associated with gifted students' underachievement. The first major study done on the underachieving gifted, conducted by Lewis and Odem in the 1940s as cited by Gallagher (1991) yielded information which pointed towards the importance of self in relation to underachievement. The study took a closer look at the personal characteristics of the underachievers and achievers, in this case only male subjects, and found that the underachieving group lacked self-confidence, motivation and perseverance, and harbored inferiority feelings.

Motivation

Deslisle and Berger (1990), suggest that if gifted children are not stimulated in the educational environment, they will not be motivated to succeed. They prefer to exert their energy in more stimulating activities, interests of their own choice (Whitmore, 1986). Also, they may not feel motivated to excel academically because the social cost is too high. In particular gifted females may intentionally underachieve (Clark, 1996).

Self-concept

Academic self-concept pertains to how a student views his or her academic ability on a broader spectrum. It can be both external and internal. External self-concept relates to students comparing their own academic performance in an area to that

of their classmates, whereas internal relates to students comparing their own performance in one area to that in other areas (McCoach & Siegle, 2002).

In their (2001) study on gifted children, McCoach and Siegle discovered that the general theory of low-self being associated with low achievement was not true in gifted children. The self-concept of both gifted achievers and gifted underachievers was equally high. Shortly after, McCoach & Siegle (2002) found that low self-concept was correlated with low achievement; however, this study was conducted on a general population of high school students and not specifically on the gifted.

Attitude

Attitude plays a big role in a child's achievement. Students who maintain a positive attitude towards their teachers and classes perform well in school unlike students with negative attitudes. Underachievers tend to rebel against authority resulting in problems in school and with teachers (McCoach & Siegle, 2000).

Ford and Thomas (1997) comment on the results of a study done in 1995 on underachieving, gifted, minority students' (African American) attitudes towards school.

They found that these students reportedly had negative attitudes towards school in part because of "(a) less positive teacher-student relations, (b) having too little time to understand the material, (c) a less supportive classroom climate, and (d) being unmotivated and disinterested in school" (p.3). In part a lack of multiculturalism presented in the classroom may have contributed to these problems with attitude. Since this study was done only on African-American gifted students, it does not generalize to all other minorities.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Participants

The participants consisted of 44 Hispanic students from several schools throughout the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. These students were enrolled in the 8th grade for the 2002-2003 school year and ranged in age between 13 to 14 years old. The students reside both in rural or urban areas, and are between low to middle socio-economic class. Four middle and junior high schools from three different independent school districts participated in the study. These schools were selected because of the close proximity to each other, which facilitated with the collection of data. There were 17 students in the study that were identified as gifted underachievers. They were labeled as such because they had met the criteria at their school district to be identified gifted and talented, but they failed to master all the objectives as presented in the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Test (TAAS) administered during the 2001-2002 school year. The remaining 27 students were identified as gifted achievers. These students were also identified as gifted by their school district, but they mastered all of the objectives on the TAAS Test.

Instrumentation

The study utilized two surveys, the *School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised* (SAAS-R) and the *Parental Influence Survey* (see Appendix). The SAAS-R was designed by Dr. D.B. McCoach and validated by McCoach and Siegle (2003). The instrument was validated in McCoach and Siegle (2003); the validation study used a factor analysis. The instrument was administered to a group of students from various ethnic backgrounds, including Hispanic students. The 35 question survey consists of a 7-point Likert type agreement scale to measure academic self-perceptions, attitudes towards school, attitudes towards teachers, goal valuation, and motivation. The reliability coefficients for the subscales range from 0.85 to 0.91.

The Parental Influence was designed by the research specifically for use in this study. The researcher devised 24 questions that pertained to parental influence. These questions were then used in two pilot studies to determine whether or not the questions were clearly stated. Based on the feedback from the pilot studies, four questions were eliminated.

Administration

There was a designated counselor at each campus that assisted the researcher in identifying the students who were eligible to participate. First, each counselor looked up the names of all the gifted students in the 8^{th} grade. Then, using the TAAS scores the counselors made a list of all the G/T students that did not master all the objectives. These students were labeled gifted underachievers in the study. An equal number of gifted achievers were selected using a random number table. The students were then scheduled to attend a meeting in designated area i.e. a library, meeting room, or classroom.

The scheduled meeting was to inform them about the survey. The researcher was not able to meet with the students at each campus; however, the counselors were well informed about the study to explain to the students the importance of participating in the survey. The students were not informed about the two different classifications (achiever or underachiever). They were simply told it was a study of Hispanic gifted students. All those who wanted to participate took home a permission slip to be filled out by their parents. Each campus selected a day in which to schedule the surveys. The students were given two surveys that were coded with a-achiever or u-underachiever. Students were given as much time as they needed to complete the surveys. The surveys were administered in March 2003. They returned to researcher upon completion. The surveys could not be traced back to any student because the researcher was never given a list of names from the different campuses.

Analysis

The data was entered into the SPSS 11.5 program. A Cronbach alpha was done on the *Parental Influence Survey* in order to determine the internal consistency as well as on the 5 subscales of SAAS-R. Then, a correlation Matrix was generated using the Pearson Product Moment to determine the correlation among the variables involved in the study. Also, a logistic regression using the Forward Stepwise (Wald) Method was run. Self-perception, attitude towards teacher, attitude towards school, goal valuation, motivation, parental influence were used as the independent variables (see p.11 for Table 1). These variables are the sums of the scores achieved on each item in the survey. Student achievement was used as the dependent variable, 1=underachiever and 2=achiever. Once the data was analyzed, the information was used to create a probability table to see how accurately a prediction about achievement could be made

based on the scores from the survey for a particular student (see p. 15 for Table 5).

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Logistic Regression Model

Variables	Mean	SE	SD	N
Self-perceptions	45.30	.691	4.58	44
Attitudes towards teacher	37.23	1.315	8.72	44
Attitudes towards school	27.91	1.015	6.73	44
Goal Valuation	39.80	0.589	3.90	44
Motivation	57.84	1.301	8.63	44
Parental Influence	35.23	0.789	5.23	44

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Item Analysis

The coefficient alpha of the 5 variables on the SAAS-R ranged from .9275 (attitudes towards school) to .7115 (self perceptions) (see Table 2). An item analysis revealed that the coefficient alpha was .3357; therefore, the survey was re-evaluated. A correlation of each item with the total was done which resulted in the omission of 8 items (see Appendix). The remaining 12 items had a coefficient alpha of .7715.

Table 2.

Coefficient Alpha for the Variables

Variables	Coefficient Alpha
Academic Self-perceptions	.7115
Attitudes towards teachers	.9148
Attitudes towards school	.9275
Goal valuation	.8599
Motivation	.9178
Parental Influence	.7715

Correlation

The correlation among the variables involved in the study is shown on Table 3. The variables that demonstrated the highest correlation (r>.70) were goal valuation and motivation (r=.82), attitude towards school and attitude towards teachers (r=.79), and attitudes toward teacher and motivation (r=.74). The correlation between attitude towards school and parental influence (r=.20), and goal valuation and parental influence (r=.20), attitude towards teachers and parental influence (r=.16), and self-perception and parental influence were weak.

Table 3.

Correlation among the independent variables (N=44)

Variables	Attitudes Towards Teachers	Attitudes Towards School	Goal Valuation	Motivation	Parental Influence
Self-perception	.389	.333	.483	.632	.059
Attitudes towards teachers		.791	.644	.739	.155
Attitudes towards school			.464	.599	.191
Goal Valuation				.818	.183
Motivation					.131

Logistic Regression

The results of the Forward Stepwise (Wald) revealed that of the six variables, Attitude towards school is the only significant predictor of achievement (see Table 4).

Table 4.

Results of Forward Stepwise Wald

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)
Attitudes towards school	.263	.095	7.589	1	.006	1.300
Constant	-8.187	2.925	7.836	1	.005	.001

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Attitude Towards School

Achievers can be predicted with an accuracy of 85.2% and underachievers at 70.6% (see Table 5).

Table 5.

Predictions using Logistic Regression Model

Observed	Achiever	Under Achiever	Percentage Correct	N
Achiever	12	5	70.6	44
Under Achiever	4	23	85.2	44
Overall Percentage			79.5	44

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that predict underachieving gifted students. The six independent variables are the following: parental influence, motivation, self-concept, attitude towards school, attitude towards teacher, and goal valuation; the dependent variable was dichotomous, achieving or underachieving gifted students. Based both on the research and because of experience in working with gifted students, the researcher expected parental influence and motivation to predict underachievement in gifted students.

The results show that of all the variables, only attitude towards school is a good predictor of achievement in gifted children. This finding is supported by Ford and Thomas's (1997) study, but is contrary to McCoach and Siegle's (2001) study which found attitudes towards school not to be a good predictor of underachievement. Perhaps, this discrepancy is due to the fact McCoach and Siegle's (2001) study was not specifically done on minority children.

The results show that parental influence has little to do with gifted children's academic achievement. This finding is opposite to that of Wood, Chapin, and Hannah's (1988) study in which they were able to predict achievers and underachievers with an overall accuracy of 86.52% based on 4 variables that measured family environment.

However, their study was done on high school students who attended a religiously oriented private school; therefore, family influence may be more pronounced than gifted students in general.

The lack of parental influence on gifted children may be in part due to their relative independence and in part to the high value placed on peer influence at this age.

The logistic regression model correctly predicts gifted achievers with an accuracy of 85.2%, and underachievers with an accuracy of 70.6% (see Table 4 p. 14). Similarly, using the same model, McCoach and Siegle (2001) were able to predict achievers with greater accuracy than underachievers. These results show that a logistic regression is a practical method for predicting underachievers. Identifying underachieving gifted students would help teachers and counselors better serve these students who are often overlooked because they may be satisfying minimum requirements, but are not achieving to their full potential.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. One problem is that there was no uniform delivery for the surveys: some campuses ignored the researcher's instructions and used their own methods for both administering and returning the surveys. This lack of standardization introduced error and reduced reliability.

The second problem is that the researcher could not go to all of the schools to pick up the surveys, some surveys were not stapled together which made it impossible to match each student's *Parental Influence Survey* to his or her SAAS-R. The loss of data made the sample less representative of the population of eighth grade students. This in turn reduces the population to which the generalization can be made. Of the original 78 participants only 50 had both survey forms matched together. In addition,

the researcher had to omit six students because they had skipped questions or left a question blank on the survey. Therefore, the actual number of participants was 44: 27 are labeled as achievers and 17 are labeled as underachievers.

Recommendations

This study could be repeated using a more representative sample to increase the generalizations. Also, different grade levels could be included to see whether these factors are still capable of predicting underachievement. It would be interesting to do a panel study of the same group of students to see whether the amount of influence of each factor changes over the years. Further research on underachievement should consider the impact of gender on underachievement in gifted students.

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APPENDIX

School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised

Instructions: This survey should take approximately 5 minutes to complete.
Part I: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. In answering each question, use a range from (1) to (7) where (1) stands for **strongly disagree** and (7) stands for **strongly agree.** Please circle only one response choice per question.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. My classes are interesting.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I am intelligent.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I can learn new ideas quickly in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I check my assignments before I turn them in.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I am smart in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I am glad that I go to this school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. This is a good school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I work hard at school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I relate well to my teachers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I am self-motivated to do my schoolwork.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. I am good at learning new things in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. This school is a good match for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. School is easy for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. I like my teachers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. I want to get good grades in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. My teachers make learning interesting.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. My teachers care about me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. Doing well in school is important for my future career goals.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. I like this school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. I can grasp complex concepts in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21. Doing well in school is one of my goals.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22. I am capable of getting straight A's.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23. I am proud of this school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
24. I complete my schoolwork regularly.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25. It's important to get good grades in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26. I am organized about my schoolwork.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27. I use a variety of strategies to learn new material.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28. I want to do my best in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29. It is important for me to do well in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30. I spend a lot of time on my schoolwork.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
31. Most of the teachers at this school are good teachers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
32. I am a responsible student.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
33. I put a lot of effort into my schoolwork.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
34. I like my classes.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
35. I concentrate on my schoolwork.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

PART II: Please choose only one response choice per question.

1. What is your cumulative GPA? What are your average grades?

- ☐ 4.0 or higher (All A's)
- ☐ 3.75 to 3.99 (Mostly A's)
- ☐ 3.5 to 3.74 (More A's than B's)
- ☐ 3.25 to 3.49 (More B's than A's)
- ☐ 3.0 to 3.24 (Mostly B's, some A's and C's)
- ☐ 2.5 to 2.99 (More B's than C's)
- ☐ 2.0 to 2.49 (More C's than B's)
- ☐ 1.5 to 1.99 (More C's than D's)
- ☐ 1.0 to 1.49 (More D's than C's)
- ☐ less than 1.0 (Mostly D's and F's)

2. On average, how much time *per week* do you spend doing homework?

- ☐ Less than 1 hour
- ☐ From 1 hour to less than 3 hours
- ☐ From 3 hours to less than 5 hours
- ☐ From 5 hours to less than 10 hours
- ☐ From 10 hours to less than 15 hours
- ☐ From 15 hours to less than 20 hours
- ☐ From 20 hours to less than 25 hours
- ☐ 25 hours or more

Thank you for your time!

PARENTAL INFLUENCE SURVEY

Instructions: This survey should take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. When answering the survey questions, use (SD) for strongly disagree, (D) for disagree, (A) for agree, and (SA) for strongly agree. There is no right or wrong answer. Please be sure to circle your answers.

#	Item				
1.	I am not punished if I make a grade below an A.	SD	D	A	SA
2.	My parents/guardians are concerned about my grades.	SD	D	A	SA
3.	I don't care if my parents are upset about my grades.	SD	D	A	SA
4.	I am required to do my homework before I can watch T.V., play videogames, or talk on the phone in the evenings.	SD	D	A	SA
5.	My parents/guardians think that having a good education is important.	SD	D	A	SA
6.	My parents/guardians are my role models.	SD	D	A	SA
7.	My parents/guardians do not care if I do my homework or not.	SD	D	A	SA
8.	My parent/guardians reward me for getting A's and B's.	SD	D	A	SA
9.	My parents call my teachers to ask about my grades if I make below a C.	SD	D	A	SA
10.	I cannot participate in sports unless all my grades are A's and B's.	SD	D	A	SA
11.	I feel good about myself when my parents/guardians are pleased with my grades.	SD	D	A	SA

12.	I work hard in school because I get punished when my grades are not as high as my parents/guardians would like them to be.	SD	D	A	SA
13.	My passing a class with a C is not good enough for my parents.	SD	D	A	SA
14.	I discuss the classes I am planning to take next school year with my parents/guardians.	SD	D	A	SA
15.	My parents/guardians frequently ask me if I have any homework.	SD	D	A	SA
16.	My parents/guardians are not interested in knowing about my grades.	SD	D	A	SA
17.	My parents/guardians do not check over my homework.	SD	D	A	SA
18.	I am obligated to keep some type of journal with all my with all my homework assignments so that my parents can make sure I keep up with all my homework.	SD	D	A	SA
19.	I don't care to please my parents/guardians by getting good grades in school.	SD	D	A	SA
20.	My parents/guardians are upset if my present grades are lower than they were in the previous six weeks.	SD	D	A	SA

VITA

Sandy Salinas Olivarez is currently enrolled at the University of Texas Pan American. Her expected date of graduation is May 2004 with a Masters of Education in Gifted and Talented.

She received her Bachelor of Arts from Texas A&M University at Kingsville in May of 1996. After graduation, she began working as an English teacher. She is currently employed at B.L. Gray Junior High in Sharyland.