SCHOLARS ON THE SIDELINES:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGH-ACHIEVING
ELEMENTARY STUDENTS IN SOUTHWEST MISSOURI

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SCHOLARS ON THE SIDELINES:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGH-ACHIEVING
ELEMENTARY STUDENTS IN SOUTHWEST MISSOURI

presented by Kerri Cox,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of educational leadership and policy analysis,
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Nancy Louis Griesemer, who passed away in 2013. I would not be where I am today without her love, encouragement, friendship, and occasional motherly critiques. Her death spurred me to get busy living life. Earning a doctorate is an important part of the next stage of my journey. While she is not here to see me walk across the stage, I will be carrying her in my heart.

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*
~Mary Oliver

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ABSTRACT

High-achieving students are those who enter the classroom ready and able to learn. They demonstrate their abilities by earning high grades in their coursework and by receiving high scores on standardized tests. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to articulate the lived experiences of high-achieving elementary students in suburban schools in southwest Missouri. How would high-achieving elementary students, their parents, and their classroom teachers describe the academic experiences of high-achieving elementary students in suburban schools in southwest Missouri? Specific research probes looked at the degree to which these students received differentiated instruction and sought to uncover the classroom experiences and academic structures that best support and most hinder these students' growth. The findings show that students have limited differentiated opportunities. In speaking to parents, students, and teachers, the following classroom structures and academic structures emerged as those that most hinder learning: (a) mixed-ability classrooms, (b) a focus on standardization, (c) teaching to the middle, and (d) personality clashes with teachers. The following classroom structures and experiences emerged from the data as those that support high-achieving students: (a) pursuing their passions in and out of the classroom; (b) supportive teachers; and (c) confronting and conquering academic challenges. Implications from this study

could provide researchers, educators, and administrators more insight into the needs of high-achievers and recommendations for supporting these students in the classroom.

Section 1:

Introduction to Dissertation

It has been a typical, boring day for Riley. Her teacher started the morning off teaching a lesson on multiplying two-digit numbers, but Riley can already multiply by three-digit numbers. For homework tonight, she'll have to do 30 two-digit problems, which is easy but annoying. Next, it was time for reading. Riley loves reading. She usually has a huge stack of library books on her nightstand, and she is obsessed with Harry Potter. Reading time should be fun for her since it is one of her favorite things; unfortunately, the teacher is making the whole class read the same book, one that Riley read three years ago. Her last academic subject of the day is science, another of her favorite topics. Today, the class is talking about the three states of matter. Riley tries to point out that there are actually more states, but the teacher doesn't seem to appreciate this tidbit of knowledge. Riley opens up her Harry Potter book and is soon transported out of her classroom and into the magical world.

For students like Riley, school should be a magical world. She loves learning and is eager to soak up the knowledge the teacher shares. She wants to discuss the concepts she learns, and she likes it when her teacher challenges her to dig deeper. Unfortunately, her school experiences are not often as positive as one might think. High-achieving students may spend many hours, day in and day out, listening to teachers teach concepts and share knowledge they already know, and these students are required to do homework to practice skills they have already mastered. This can be a frustrating experience, especially for students who are highly interested in academics. These are the children who want to be at school, who enjoy learning, and who learn easily. Oftentimes, they may be the ideal students. If this is the case, why are schools not meeting their academic needs? What is this experience like for the students?

Background of the Study

As studies and news reports take critical looks at the nation's public education system, there is often a rallying cry for the children who are not achieving academically. Students who have fallen behind their grade level need additional instructional support, and schools have been making progress in meeting their needs (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Loveless, 2008). On the other end of the spectrum lie the advanced students, those who have already mastered the skills and learned the content deemed appropriate for their grade level. Surprisingly, these students have academic needs that are not being met (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Loveless, 2008; Petrilli, Griffith, Wright, & Kim, 2016; Plucker, Giancola, Healey, Arndt, & Wang, 2015).

From the nation's earliest days of one-room schoolhouses, educators have been challenged to meet the needs of students on multiple academic levels within a single classroom. As the educational system grew and advanced, students were sorted into grade levels based on their ages; however, this still did not resolve the problem since grade levels were based on age instead of academic readiness. Through the 1950s and beyond, many schools attempted to use tracking programs to sort students into groups within their grade levels based on their abilities, but these programs mostly fell to the wayside as their effectiveness was questioned and issues of fairness and equity were raised (Tieso, 2003). Since then, schools have continued to sort students into grade levels, with a wide range of abilities represented in a single classroom.

In the last 15 years, two major pieces of federal legislation were passed in hopes of providing major educational reform: the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 (Jacob, 2017). NCLB focused on

moving underachieving students up to proficiency on standardized assessments; however, the legislation did not include provisions focusing on high-achieving students (those already scoring in proficient and advanced levels). In the years after NCLB, researchers found a lack of advancement for high achievers, even as state and national assessment scores improved for other students (Loveless, 2008; Watkins & Sheng, 2008).

Furthermore, teachers recognized that this legislation forced them to focus more on their remedial students than their advanced students. Farkas and Duffett (2008) conducted a national survey of teachers and reported that 78% agreed with this statement: “Getting underachieving students to reach ‘proficiency’ has become so important that the needs of advanced students take a back seat” (p. 61).

In 2015, ESSA offered a change at the federal level from NCLB. It included provisions that measured student growth on standardized assessments, rather than purely focusing on moving students up to proficiency. After this, many states revised their accountability measures; however, researchers have found that few states do an adequate job of encouraging schools to meet the needs of high achievers (Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015). Therefore, this problem remains. In the foreword to *High Stakes for High Achievers: State Accountability in the Age of ESSA*, Chester E. Finn, Jr., stated, “The policy challenge going forward is to devise accountability systems that deal with the ceiling as well as the floor. This is partly about fairness. It’s wrong for any child to miss out on academic challenges at school, and we should do everything we can to develop the full potential of all our students, including high achievers” (Petrilli et al., 2016, p. 5).

Statement of the Problem

In many classrooms, teachers are teaching to the average level of the students, something teachers refer to as *teaching to the middle*. Students who fall below the average often receive additional support from tutors, interventionists, and more one-on-one attention from the teacher. Unfortunately, the students who have been left behind in this scenario are the advanced learners. High achievers can be defined as those scoring in the advanced categories or in the top tenth percentile on standardized assessments (Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016). They can also be defined as those who have mastered curriculum concepts and skills before the classroom instruction has taken place, which makes a distinction between academic readiness and abstract intellectual ability (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). In addition to their academic strengths, high achievers demonstrate character traits related to motivation and goal setting (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Based on their aptitude and personal characteristics, they are advanced students with advanced academic needs.

Problem of Practice

While these high-achieving students can demonstrate academic prowess, they often are not offered any acceleration or differentiation from their peers. A landmark study conducted by Archambault, Brown, Hallmark, Emmons, and Zhang (1993) found that most advanced learners were being educated in the regular classroom and teachers were not modifying their instructional practices to meet their needs. Similar results were found two decades later when Assouline, Colangelo, Heo, and Dockery (2013) conducted a survey of gifted students, who reported receiving the majority of their instruction in the

regular classroom with few opportunities for accelerated instruction. In that 20-year span, educational practices did not dramatically change for high achievers.

For high-achieving students, this has resulted in a lot of waiting and boredom in class due to the lack of challenge (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Peine & Coleman, 2010; Thorkildsen, 1993). This disengagement from the learning process can have negative effects, including dropping out of school (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Furthermore, it can impact students' career options and, ultimately, the national economy. Students who are not challenged at advanced levels in mathematics, science, and technology will have a hard time fulfilling the high-tech jobs of the future (Frakas & Duffett, 2014; Plucker et al., 2015; Vilorio, 2014). Finally, for students who are minorities or living in poverty, not meeting their academic needs becomes a social justice issue. These students rely on their school districts to recognize their potential and provide advanced instruction even more than their wealthier, non-minority peers (Card & Giuliano, 2015); unfortunately, research has shown they are less likely to be identified as gifted, less likely to be offered differentiated instruction, and more likely to attend schools with the fewest advanced options (Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015).

Gap in the Literature

The literature regarding advanced learners mostly focuses on students who have been identified as gifted and talented; however, this study focused on the broader category of high achievers for three reasons. First, not all gifted students have been formally identified. For example, they may be in schools without gifted programs, they may have narrowly missed their school's cutoff for qualification for a gifted program, or

they may have missed out on the initial identification screening for a gifted program. Next, those identified as gifted are not equally gifted in all academic areas. Some may struggle in language arts, while others struggle in mathematics, for example; therefore, giftedness does not fully correlate with academic achievement. Furthermore, by concentrating on the needs of gifted learners, we are focused on the top 2-5% of students, whereas, high achievers fall into a larger category. High achievers can be any student who already understands the skills and materials for a particular unit, making this concept much broader.

Much has been written about the academic needs and experiences of gifted students; however, less research has been devoted to the high achiever. Furthermore, what has been written about high achievers has mostly been in quantitative studies regarding assessment scores and state accountability measures (Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016). While Loveless (2008) showed a lack of improvement on high achievers' standardized assessment scores and Petrilli et al. (2016) showed a lack of accountability regarding high achievers with state measures, these studies have not expressed what it is like to be a high-achieving student whose needs are not being met. What are their lived experiences?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to develop an understanding of the lived experiences for high-achieving elementary students at elementary schools in southwest Missouri. For the purposes of this study, the term *high-achieving student* refers to students scored in the advanced category on the standardized Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) tests and/or students who predominately earned A's as letter

grades (or the top category on a standards-based grading system). The standardized assessment classifications are derived from the work of Loveless (2008) and Petrilli et al. (2016), who used those measurements for identifying high achievers, while the grade point average measurement was chosen for this study since it indicates demonstrated academic achievement in the classroom.

Methods of inquiry included analysis of data collected through focus groups to gather the voices of high-achieving elementary students, their parents, and their teachers. First, this study gained information about whether the students received any differentiation in their school instruction, focusing specifically on the areas of pacing, challenge, and pursuit of passions—a framework based on Tomlinson’s (2005) recommendations for providing differentiated instruction to highly able students. Also, this study explored the academic experiences and classroom structures participants saw as supporting their high-achieving students’ academic development and those they felt were hindering their development.

A lack of qualitative information about the lived experiences of high achievers has been demonstrated through the review of literature. Quantitative research studies have found that the academic needs of these high achievers are not being met (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015; Watkins & Sheng, 2008). This study can help address these problems by contributing to the scholarly base of knowledge and by providing information to be shared with educators, in hopes of altering their instructional practices.

Research Questions

In order to better understand the lived experiences of high-achieving elementary students in southwest Missouri, the primary research question that guided this study was the following:

- How would high-achieving elementary students, their parents, and their classroom teachers describe the academic experiences of high-achieving elementary students in suburban schools in southwest Missouri?

The following sub-questions provided more focus for understanding the students' experiences:

- In which ways, if any, do high-achieving students receive differentiated instruction, with regard to the degree of challenge, appropriate pacing, and pursuit of students' passions?
- In which ways, if any, do academic experiences and classroom structures hinder high-achieving students?
- In which ways, if any, do academic experiences and classroom structures support high-achieving students?

Conceptual Framework

In order to better understand the academic experiences and the classroom structures high-achieving elementary students encounter, this study was bounded by the work of Carol Ann Tomlinson in the area of differentiated instruction. In the 2005 article *Quality Curriculum and Instruction for Highly Able Students*, Tomlinson recommended that instruction for high achievers be modified in these three areas: (a) appropriate pacing, (b) degree of challenge, and (c) pursuit of students' passions.

The term *pacing* refers to how quickly the instruction moves along. High achievers tend to learn more easily and more rapidly than their classmates, requiring a faster pace of instruction (Burney, 2008; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross (2004) argued that accelerated instruction is the best practice for meeting the needs of high-achieving students. This can come in the form of skipping a grade, the utilization of ability grouping within a grade or class, or the inclusion of some form of personalized learning, in which students have a more control over the pace of their learning (Colangelo et al., 2004).

The term *challenge* refers to how easily students learn the material. In the 1930s, Vygotsky (1978) developed a landmark theory called the *zone of proximal development*, which described the area between a person's actual developmental level and their potential level. This is where learning takes place, but in order for that to happen, according to Vygotsky, students need to be pushed by their peers or their teacher to make this learning leap. Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) spoke of optimal experiences in which learning takes place, describing these as times when people are pushed just beyond their prior boundaries. Vygotsky and Csikszentmihalyi claimed that students must be challenged in order to grow and develop; therefore, if coursework is too easy, learning does not take place.

Tomlinson (2005) used the term *passion* to refer to students' talents and interests. She contended that students' passions should be incorporated by providing more student choice, allowing for creativity, and providing opportunities to make real-world connections, for example. Studies have found a strong connection between engagement and enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Garn & Jolly, 2014; Hagenauer & Hascher,

2014). Hagenauer and Hascher (2014) stated, “Enjoyment is a necessary precondition for learners’ stable and enduring interest in lifelong learning” (p. 27).

Tomlinson’s (2005) conceptual framework helps to further define effective instruction for highly able students. This study explored the academic experiences and the classroom structures encountered by high achievers. Since those are somewhat vague terms, Tomlinson’s (2005) three areas provided focused probes for this study, including the following: (a) appropriate pacing, (b) degree of challenge, and (c) pursuit of passions. Interview questions were developed to incorporate these elements of the conceptual framework.

Design of the Study

In his description of the phenomenological movement, Spiegelberg (1971) said researchers should “turn to the things themselves” by “turning toward phenomena which had been blocked from sight by the theoretical patterns in front of them” (p. 681). This study utilized qualitative phenomenological research designs in order to understand the phenomena of high-achieving elementary students and their academic experiences and to “depict the essence or basic structure of experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26).

Setting

The setting for this study included three elementary schools in southwest Missouri. While many middle schools and high schools offer opportunities for advanced learners to benefit from advanced courses, most elementary schools have not developed systematic protocols or methods for working with advanced students. Therefore, I opted to limit this study to elementary schools in order to focus on the early academic

experiences of high-achieving students. I will not include my own school due to my insider status and my relationship with students who could be potential participants.

When selecting the three public elementary schools in southwest Missouri for this study, an attempt was made to select sites that offered some variance in these factors: (a) socioeconomic status of students and (b) population size of the building. This variation helped ensure that the phenomenon in question is not relegated to a single type of school. While these sites do not fully represent the range of variations within Missouri public schools, they capture the essence of what could be considered a typical school.

Participants

When selecting participants, researchers should find those who “will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2014, p. 189). While very young students may be high achieving, they may not be able to adequately articulate these experiences; therefore, I focused on upper elementary students in fourth and fifth grades. Potential participants were identified as *high achieving* based on their on academic achievement (predominately earned A’s as letter grades or the top category on a standards-based grading system) and standardized test scores (scoring in *advanced* categories on the Missouri Assessment Program tests). Students who were in gifted programs were excluded from this study since those students receive some form of differentiation through the gifted program (even though it could be inadequate). Furthermore, in describing their school experiences, students in gifted programs could intermingle their experiences in those programs with their experiences in classrooms; whereas, this study was focused specifically in looking at typical classroom experiences.

Creswell (2014) recommended utilizing from three to ten participants for a phenomenological study. For this study, I used a purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of students from participating school settings based on school counselor recommendations. Since this study focused on high achievers, school counselors helped identify “a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). In order to increase the transferability of findings from a qualitative study, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended the use of maximum variation to allow for “the possibility of a greater range of application” (p. 257). Therefore, care was made to invite participants from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Once potential student participants were identified, the counselor contacted the students’ parents to share materials related to the research design and informed consent and to provide my contact information (Appendix A & Appendix B). Once parental consent was acquired, the researcher invited the students and their parents to participate in qualitative surveys or in focus groups with the researcher held on site.

The students’ parents were also invited to attend a separate focus group or to complete a qualitative survey since they could provide additional insight into the students’ experiences over multiple years. Finally, since teachers and school counselors could provide a better understanding of the academic experiences and classroom structures, they were also provided informed consent materials and asked to participate in focus groups or in qualitative surveys (Appendix C).

Approximately 15-40 students (and their respective parents), as well as 4-10 teachers were queried per site and invited to participate in the study. The focus groups

ultimately included 19 students, 23 parents, and 4 teachers from the three elementary schools. Qualitative surveys were returned from 1 student, 1 parent, and 2 teachers.

Data Collection Tools

Data was collected utilizing several qualitative methods, primarily phenomenological focus groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). These focus groups included “unstructured and generally open-ended questions that [were] few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from participants” (Creswell, 2014, p. 190). Westcott and Littleton (2005) provided specific guidelines for interviewing children, which were followed. They recommend the use of open-ended questions, avoidance of leading questions, not interrupting the child, and paying attention to the participant’s terminology and body language. Each semi-structured interview or focus group meeting lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes to allow an ample amount of time for discussion.

Focus group participants were asked questions relating to academic experiences and classroom structures, specially focusing on pacing, challenge, and pursuits of passions (which were identified by Tomlinson, 2005, as important elements of differentiation for highly able students). This led to an understanding of which elements support and which elements hinder high-achieving students. Questions were developed utilizing the recommendations of Creswell (2014), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Seidman (2013), and separate focus group protocols were developed for students, for parents, and for teachers (Appendix D, Appendix E, & Appendix F). Furthermore, interview questions were aligned with ethical considerations. Hill (2005) outlined several ethical concerns to be considered when working with children, and I ensured that research procedures were respectful of the power dynamic between adults and children

and was responsible for ensuring the child's confidentiality, in addition to following the requirements of the institutional review board that considered this study.

Additionally, a qualitative survey tool was developed for each group of participants (students, parents, and teachers), and these surveys included open-ended questions similar to those used in the focus groups (Appendix G, Appendix H, & Appendix I). The waiver of informed consent and the survey instrument was distributed electronically to parents and teachers from the selected sites that were not willing or able to participate in the focus groups. This instrument provided data from additional participants, which was used to triangulate the data from the focus groups. After the surveys were returned, content analysis was utilized "for the purpose of drawing inferences about the meaning of recorded information" by "carefully reading the comments to identify the presence of certain words, concept, themes, phrases, characters, or sentences in order to quantify them" (Fink, 2017, p. 152).

Data Analysis

These many forms of data came together to paint a picture that helped answer the research questions. Appropriate data analysis techniques were utilized. First, all of the data was examined, treating all pieces as equally important, as part of the horizontalization process described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). This helped establish the researcher's trustworthiness, as it ensured the researcher does not pick and choose data that reflects a preconceived hypothesis he or she wants to prove. Next, all of the data was reviewed in order begin to "construct categories or themes that capture recurring patterns that cut across the data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 207). Once a handful of categories were identified, all pieces of data were then coded and sorted to denote their

relations to these themes (Creswell, 2014). Since this was a phenomenological study, close attention was paid to data that helped to understand how people experience the phenomena identified in the research questions. Continued phenomenological reduction allowed the researcher to focus on the participants' descriptions of their experiences "in order to get at its essence" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 227).

Limitations and Assumptions

This study relied primarily on qualitative interviews and open-ended qualitative surveys. Creswell (2014) described several limitations of this form of research, including the use of "indirect information" (p. 191) about the participants' academic experiences, which have been filtered through the eyes of the student and parent. Furthermore, Creswell warned that the "researcher's presence may bias responses" (p. 191) since participants may be seeking to please the researcher instead of providing authentic information. Care has been taken to utilize several strategies recommended for enhancing the validity and reliability of qualitative studies, including triangulation of data, member checks of findings, compiling an audit trail, and including a maximum variation of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Another limitation of this study was that the findings may not be generalizable to other populations due to the qualitative nature of the design and the small group of participants involved. In order for the study to be more representative of wider experiences, participants were selected from three separate sites, and the views of students, parents, and teachers were solicited for a broad understanding of the lived experiences of high-achieving students.

In designing this research study, several assumptions were made. First, it was assumed that participants would provide rich, truthful accounts of their experiences. Second, it was assumed that I would be able to bracket my own experiences as a teacher and as a parent and set them aside, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), in order to analyze the qualitative data with ethical considerations with regard to the validity and reliability of my findings.

Design Controls

This study employed qualitative research methodologies and designs. Fink (2017) stated, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9); therefore, the best way to understand the academic experiences of high-achieving students is to ask them and their parents and teachers. This in-depth interviewing took place primarily in focus group settings, with additional information gleaned from open-ended surveys distributed to participants using electronic means. Once all of the data was gathered, appropriate qualitative analysis took place in order to substantiate findings regarding the academic experiences and classroom structures that support and hinder high-achieving students, especially with regard to differentiated instruction. Finally, ethical guidelines were adhered to over the course of this study.

In order to establish trustworthiness, I thoroughly explained the analysis techniques and provided an audit trail, describing each step taken as part of the data analysis. Next, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the researcher must continually participate in the *epoche* process to bracket “prejudices and assumptions” (p. 27) so they can be “temporarily set aside” (p. 27) while the themes are constructed using the data.

These elements should be documented, which was done in my audit trail. As a teacher and a parent, I have experiences with high-achieving students; furthermore, my husband is a teacher in a gifted program. While these items inform my inquiry, they could not drive the analysis of the data.

In order to establish validity, I utilized several techniques recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Creswell (2014). First, I identified my own biases. Next, I conducted member checking by sharing initial findings with participants to ensure my initial descriptions of the experiences matched what the participants recognized as their experiences. Similarly, peer debriefing allowed me to gather feedback from colleagues. Next, using multiple sources of data helped me triangulate the findings (Creswell, 2014). Interviewing students, parents, and teachers from three separate sites about this phenomenon provided more valid insights into the experiences of high-achieving students. Finally, results were shared using “rich, thick descriptions,” which can help other researchers decide whether these findings are transferable to their settings (Creswell, 2014, p. 202).

Since the researcher is the primary data collector and data analyst in qualitative research, it is important to consider the researcher’s positionality on the topic. My interest in high-achieving students may date back to my own elementary years, where I exhibited a love of school and a desire to do well. Furthermore, as a parent, I am currently raising two high-achieving students, one is in a gifted program and one is not. I have witnessed their experiences of desiring to learn more and to be challenged in school. Finally, I am an elementary librarian and my husband is a teacher in an elementary gifted program. Our career experiences have introduced us to many high-achieving students. Despite all

of these personal connections to this topic, I do not truly understand the phenomenon of high-achieving students across a broader spectrum; therefore, it was important to approach my study with an open mind toward capturing the experiences of the participants in this study and not allowing them to be seen only through the windows of my own experiences. Interviewing a number of participants at three sites allowed me to garner a broader understanding of the phenomenon of high-achieving students.

Definitions of Key Terms

Gifted. When thinking of high-achieving students, many often think the term *high achieving* is interchangeable with *gifted*. According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2010), “Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains” (p. 1). In the state of Missouri, school districts have some latitude for identifying gifted students based on an assortment of measurements (DESE, 2017b). However, while gifted students may be highly able, they are not all high achievers. Some may be advanced in particular subjects, while struggling in others, and some may lack the defining motivation necessary to demonstrate achievement.

High-achieving students. High-achieving students have the intellectual capacity to learn more advanced materials than their peers and demonstrate an ability to do so. Loveless (2008) and Petrilli et al. (2016) previously defined high achievers as those who scored in advanced categories or in the top tenth percentile on standardized assessments, making this category broader than the category of gifted. Furthermore, Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) described the difference between academic readiness and ability.

While gifted students may be able to learn advanced concepts, they may not be equally ready to do so in all areas. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, a high-achieving student will be defined as one who scores in advanced categories on the Missouri Assessment Program assessment and who predominately earns A's as letter grades (or the top category on a standards-based grading system). The terms *highly able* and *academically advanced* may also be used.

Ability grouping. Ability grouping is a classroom structure whereby students are sorted into groups to receive instruction based on their ability (Tieso, 2003). In the past, schools may have sorted an entire grade level of students into advanced, average, and intermediate tracks, but that has fallen out of favor. Today's schools are more likely to use *cluster grouping*, which is the sorting of students based on their academic readiness in a specific content area or for a specified unit of instruction. These groups are more fluid, with students able to move from one group to another as their needs change.

Differentiated instruction. In traditional classroom structures, virtually all students receive the same instruction (other than those who are in special education programs). Differentiated instruction requires the teacher to modify the materials and instruction to meet the needs of individual students or groups of students. Teachers may use ability grouping or personalized learning as part of differentiated instruction.

Challenge. As part of differentiated instruction, Tomlinson (2005) recommended teachers vary the level of challenge provided to students. As students move from materials and skills that are already known to them into that which is unknown, they face a challenge. If the school instruction is too easy and only includes concepts the student already understands, there is a lack of challenge. When faced with an appropriate

challenge, students should experience an *a-ha moment* (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011) or a learning leap (Vygotsky, 1978).

Pacing. As part of differentiated instruction, Tomlinson (2005) recommended teachers adapt the pacing of instruction to meet students' needs. Highly able students often learn more quickly than their peers (Burney, 2008); therefore, they would benefit from moving more quickly through instruction to prevent boredom and lack of engagement.

Passions. Tomlinson (2005) contended that teachers should appeal to students' passions as part of differentiated instruction. She described passions as topics that were of deep interest to the students, as well as multiple modes of demonstrating learning based on individual talents. Connecting to student passions increases engagement, which is demonstrated by enjoyment of the instruction and a motivation to learn (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hagenauer & Hascher, 2014).

Significance of Study

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to articulate the lived experiences of high-achieving elementary students in suburban schools in southwest Missouri. Currently, there is a gap in the literature regarding high-achieving students, especially with regard to qualitative literature. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that high achievers' academic needs are not being met in the classroom, which is a problem of practice (Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015). This study can contribute to the body of educational research and impact instructional practices.

While some literature exists regarding the academic and emotional needs of gifted students, the experiences of the broader category of high-achieving students have not

been explored in as great of depth. Some high-achieving students may be classified gifted, but the two terms are not interchangeable, as some gifted students show high academic achievement while others do not (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Therefore, it was important to gain a specific understanding of the experiences of high-achieving students, as they are a phenomenon in their own right.

This study helped to fill the existing gap in the literature by providing a phenomenological study about the experiences of high-achieving elementary students, adding to the body of quantitative studies focusing on these students and the full body of research regarding gifted students, specifically. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “A phenomenological approach is well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences” (p. 28), and the task of a phenomenologist is “to depict the essence or basic structure of experience” (p. 26). This study can help researchers and practitioners to understand the essence of experience for high achievers. This qualitative study reflects the existing quantitative studies showing high-achieving students’ academic needs are not being thoroughly met; therefore, the students need to have their voices heard. This can be accomplished by publishing journal articles and presenting at teaching conferences, thus sharing the study’s findings (and student voices) with researchers and practitioners.

Furthermore, this study can have an impact on educational practices. Since studies have found that high-achieving students’ needs are being sidelined (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015), it is imperative to understand which academic experiences and classroom structures hinder these students’ academic development. Furthermore, the study helped to uncover the academic

experiences and classroom structures that support high achievers' academic development. By describing how teachers can better meet the needs of high-achieving learners, a set of best practices can be identified and shared.

As an educator in a school district in southwest Missouri, I plan to share the findings of my study with colleagues at my institution and with practitioners around the state and nation. This study can provide useful information by describing effective and ineffective classroom practices for instructing high achievers. I will prepare a presentation of the findings to share with administrators and teachers. The results will include specific, actionable recommendations, in hopes of altering the current practices.

Summary

High-achieving students are a phenomenon, consisting of students with high abilities and personal characteristics relating to motivation and goal setting. High achievers may or may not be gifted, and gifted students may or may not be high achievers, thus making these terms distinct despite their apparent overlaps. Research has demonstrated that the needs of high achievers are not being met, as demonstrated by a lack of improvement on state assessments and a lack of inclusion in state and federal accountability measures (Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015). Furthermore, teachers recognize that their attention is divided, with more of it going to struggling students, leaving high achievers on the sidelines (Farkas & Duffett, 2008).

This study addresses the gap in the literature and the problem of practice by entering a phenomenological study of elementary high achievers into the body of research. This study sought to give voice to these students, as they articulate their lived experiences. Participants were asked about their experiences with differentiated

instruction (especially with regard to the pacing, degree of challenge, and pursuit of passions) in order to identify the academic experiences and classroom structures that support and hinder high achievers. Established qualitative research methods were utilized to select settings and participants, conduct interviews, and analyze and share the data. Results of this study were shared through journal articles submissions, executive summaries, and professional presentations. Special attention was paid to practitioners, in hopes that the findings can influence their classroom practices.

Section 2:
Practitioner Setting for the Study

Introduction

Three suburban public elementary schools in southwest Missouri were selected as the sites for conducting this research study. These sites were purposefully selected to be typical within the state of Missouri, while also providing some variation in size and socioeconomic levels. In order to fully understand the practitioner setting, it is useful to look at the history of public schools in the state of Missouri, as well as some major pieces of legislation at the federal level. Next, the organizational structures and leadership structures of the system will be analyzed. Finally, the research questions that guided this study will be presented with an analysis of the implication for research within the selected practitioner setting.

History of Organization

From the earliest days, public schools in America were developed as a means to achieve something good for public interest. However, defining what the public interest is, who should have a say in determining the goals, and who should pay to support these goals is a complicated process that plays out in the political arena and the public eye. In describing the concept of a policy paradox, Stone (2012) described the contrast between the market model, which is based on self-interest, and the *polis* model, which is based on public interest. She stated, “A model of the *polis* must assume collective will and collective effort” (p. 20); however, it is this very aspect of the *polis* model that is most troublesome. For public schools, the collective efforts have been shaped at the local, state, and federal levels in hopes of benefitting the public good.

In Missouri, the roots of the public school system were heavily localized in control throughout the 1800s (Phillips, 1911). During the early part of the twentieth

century, the state government began to assert more control over the school system by enacting regulations and reform measures (Burton, 2013; Thomas, 2006). By the mid-1900s, partially in response to the Great Depression, the World Wars, and the Space Race, the federal government became more involved in public education (Anderson, 2007; Church & Sedlak, 1976). Since the dawning of a new century in the 2000s, federal control has been more pronounced, with reform measures including a greater emphasis on accountability, both through the adoption of curriculum standards and the increased regiment of standardized testing (Anderson, 2007; Fast, 2016; Shelly, 2011). These traditions and educational mandates bare influence on how the needs of high-achieving students are relegated in today's classrooms.

An Early History of Missouri Public Schools

Well before Missouri became a state in 1821, organized schools were a part of many communities, from one-room schoolhouses in small towns to formal private academies in the larger cities. As the first state constitution was developed, it included provisions regarding the development of public schools in defined townships, which were to educate poor children for free, based on Thomas Jefferson's notions that "American education should be a meritocracy, or a system that provides equal opportunity for all" (Fast, 2016, p. 19). However, funding mechanisms for such a system were not detailed in the state's constitution, which could account for the slow growth of schools during this early period (Carrington, 1931; Phillips, 1911). It was not until 1839 that the formal public school system of Missouri truly began with the Geyer Act, which created the role of state superintendent of schools and instituted a system for permanently funding public schools through local taxes (Burton, 2013; Carrington, 1931; Phillips, 1911).

This early history of Missouri public schools echoes the common school movement taking place across the nation, as leaders like Horace Mann sought to impose educational standards in exchange for financial support of schools (Church & Sedlak, 1976). Mann believed everyone would benefit from “a skilled workforce that would contribute to America’s growing economy...[therefore,] it was in everyone’s best interest to support taxation” (Fast, 2016, p. 19). In addition to his ideas regarding funding, Mann would also shape the structure of public schools to this day. Inspired by his observations of the Prussian school system, Mann proposed dividing students by age and having different teachers for each level, a move away from the one-room schoolhouse tradition (Pratt, 1986). What we now think of as the factory model of education did spring forth during America’s Industrial Revolution; however, its inspiration actually came from another country. To this day, many of Mann’s ideas regarding the organization of schools remain in place over a century later.

With funding in place, Missouri’s public school system rapidly grew in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In his book *A History of Education in Missouri*, Claude Phillips (1911) stated, “By 1853 about twenty-five hundred school districts had been formed, and there were enumerated nearly three hundred thousand children of school age” (p. 16). In 1853, the Kelly Act established the role of County Commissioner of Common Schools and outlined the organization of school districts to be formed with sizes of approximately six to nine square miles, making it possible for children to easily be able to walk or ride horses to a local school (Burton, 2013). Most importantly, this act established state funding (in addition to the earlier measures of local funding) for the public education system. With this legislation in place, 25% of the state revenue was

utilized for schooling (Thomas, 2006), providing some measure of state financial support in addition to the state mandates.

Unfortunately, this growing success did not last long. As with the nation, Missouri public schools were devastated by the Civil War and “the beginnings of a school system [became] completely disorganized” (Phillips, 1911). Funds were no longer available for this fledgling system, many school buildings were damaged in the war, and most schools closed (Thomas, 2006), creating dire times. Upon the conclusion of the war, Missouri returned to rebuilding its education system, with many pieces of legislation outlining the next phase of development, including the establishment of local school boards, early guidelines for teacher certification, and processes for textbook adoptions (Carrington, 1931). Provisions were made for educating the African-American children in the state, as well as veterans of the Civil War (Thomas, 2006).

Approximately 15 years after the end of the war, school districts could be found across the state with some continuity of organization, thanks in part to revisions in the state constitution (Phillips, 1911).

Upon the turn of the twentieth century, the state legislature passed the first compulsory attendance law, requiring children between the ages of eight and fourteen to attend school for at least three-fourths of the school year, with exemptions if the child had a disability, was needed to help at home, or lived too far from a school building (Burton, 2013). During this era, rural children were most likely to still be attending school in traditional one-room schoolhouses. In pastoral Greene County, in the southwest region of Missouri, these schools were reported to have anywhere from six to 56 students in attendance (Burton, 2013). Meanwhile, in urban areas, huge brick structures would

welcome hundreds to thousands of students, separated into grade levels spurred by Mann's vision for public education. The city of St. Louis hired an architect named William Ittner to develop a new inspirational vision for these large schools. His designs, which included more natural lighting, green spaces, large classrooms, and creative exterior elements meant to add grandness, would be used across the city and would inspire school architecture across the nation (Strauss, 2017).

W.T. Carrington, the State Superintendent of Missouri Public Schools from 1899-1907, stated that the early 1900s was a time when "the modern rural schools, the modern graded school, the modern and model high school buildings and the great plans for colleges and universities were perfected" (1931, p. 137), with much being done to standardize coursework, modernize school buildings, and formalize teacher training across the state. This reflected what was going on at the national level with John Dewey's progressive movement, which "sought to make schools more efficient, both operationally and instructionally" (Fast, 2016, p. 22). Unfortunately, the Great Depression of the 1930s hampered this era of growth and improvement.

Once the state returned to better economic footing after the Great Depression, efforts were made to consolidate school districts in order to provide efficiency and standardization as the number of children enrolled in public schools blossomed. While rural schools in Missouri did their best to educate a growing body of students through the mid-century era, the conditions of the buildings widely varied and many teachers were still responsible for teaching a number of grade levels in a single room (Thomas, 2006), providing a contrast to the more urban population centers. Leaders assumed streamlining the number of schools would make it easier to oversee them and ensure appropriate

funding and educational opportunities were available within each district (Brownwell et al., 1966; Carrington, 1931).

After the passage of the Missouri School District Reorganization Act of 1947, the number of districts in Missouri dramatically decreased. In the 1880s, there were approximately 10,000 school districts across the state (Phillips, 1911); by the 1960s, there were fewer than 3000 districts, which were further reduced to fewer than 1000 by 1966 (Brownwell et al., 1966). Nationally, a similar trend has been noted, with a “tenfold [decrease in the number of school districts] during the twentieth century between 1939-40 and 2003-04” (Shelly, 2011, p. 125). This rapid consolidation greatly changed the face of Missouri public schools, especially in rural areas where the one-room schoolhouses that were once the center of the community began to close (Thomas, 2006). As America approached the middle of the twentieth century, a similar story was told across the nation, with smaller school districts consolidating into larger ones, and state and federal governments gaining more control.

Twentieth Century Tug-of-War for Control

“Schooling in the United States underwent a vast change after World War II. Society let it be known that it expected schools to accomplish certain social tasks which had never been expected of them” (Church & Sedlak, 1976, p. 401). The nation hoped to prevent a reoccurrence of the Great Depression, wanted to show dominance in a world with the potential for war, and desired to be the first in the world to put a person on the moon. With these goals in mind, national educational reforms focused on strengthening the academic focuses of public schools. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 provided targeted funding for enhancing mathematics and science programs in

elementary and secondary schools, as well as colleges and universities. Some have argued this “began the steady, incremental expansion of the federal role” in education (Anderson, 2007, p. 57).

A tug-of-war between local, state, and federal control of schools became more pronounced, with more federal mandates being enacted to ensure educational access, excellence, and equity, just as the emerging baby boom sent unprecedented numbers of students into public schools. The passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was a watershed moment on the national level, “elevating elementary and secondary schools to a permanent place at the table of Washington politics and policy” (McAndrews, 2006, p. 9). Over one billion dollars in funding was directed to state education officials to enhance educational programs, purchase textbooks and materials, fund school libraries, provide for educational research, and enhance state education agencies (Anderson, 2007; McAndrews, 2006). However, while money began to flow into schools, it was immediately noted that it was not enough to achieve the ambitious results expected by society and by legislators. The next two decades saw continual bickering at the federal level under presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford over the need to provide educational funding while being conscientious of the budget (McAndrews, 2006). This became even more pronounced after the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which delivered widespread mandates regarding the education of students with special needs without sufficient funding for schools to achieve these mandates (Anderson, 2007).

In the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter sought to create the first Department of Education within the Executive Branch, arguing it would fill “a compelling need for the

increased national attention...to education issues” (McAndrews, 2006). However, this furthered the debate regarding federal control versus local control even more. While the National Defense Education Act of 1958 focused on promoting the educational interests of the nation’s high-achieving students, the following pieces of federal legislation moved the focus to the most needy students, including those with disabilities, those living in poverty, and those who were not achieving academically. While this may have been born of honorable intentions, some have argued that it resulted in further academic decline for American students overall. Reading specialist Paul Copperman testified in Congress in 1979, stating,

The achievement decline of the past fifteen years can be partially attributed to the federal policy and program focus on below-average-ability students and the consequent reduction in performance standards for all students. It is important to note that high-ability students recorded a much-more striking drop in academic achievement during the past fifteen years. (Anderson, 2007, p. 123)

Despite these concerns and a raging political debate, the Department of Education was created, providing a stronger federal vehicle for both mandates and funding.

In 1983, a report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education known as *A Nation at Risk* further fueled the speculation that the American public school system was deficient. “With the release of *A Nation at Risk*, the days when local school systems were left alone and assumed to provide a world-class education were gone forever” (Shelly, 2011, p. 122). The report called for states to create curricular standards and implement more standardized testing. While largely a federal push, states still had control of what the standards were and how they would be tested. In the years that

followed, mandates and regulations blossomed, impacting everything from teacher certification to anti-bullying measures (Shelly, 2011). These efforts were further buoyed by the passage of Goals 2000 at the federal level in 1993 (Anderson, 2007), under President Bill Clinton. While promoting federal efforts, this legislation still gave the appearance that state and local participation was voluntary. Senator Ted Kennedy stated, “This is a bottoms-up education reform with support from the top down” (Anderson, 2007, p. 138); however, others argued that it was the opposite. By tying federal funding to the *voluntary* reforms, they were seen as less than voluntary.

Missouri reacted to both the *Nation at Risk* report and the Goals 2000 legislation with major educational reforms at the state level. In 1985, lawmakers passed legislation that would lead to the development of the Missouri School Improvement Program, a set of standards and indicators to be used for assessing districts based on their educational processes, resources, and student performance (DESE, 2017c). Teams of educators and representatives of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education visited every district in the state to perform onsite evaluations, marking a drastic change from prior classification systems. The next major shift for Missouri education occurred with the passage of the Outstanding Schools Act in 1993, which led to the first adoption of statewide standards and a new performance-based assessment system (the Missouri Assessment Program, known as MAP testing). Furthermore, new guidelines were created for identifying and intervening in deficient schools (DESE, 2017c). Though acting through state measures and mandates, Missouri clearly had been affected by efforts at the federal level as the twenty-first century approached.

Federal Accountability in the Twenty-First Century

Federal involvement in education reached a pinnacle with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001, adopted under President George W. Bush. While it evolved from the precedents set by Goals 2000 and earlier legislation, it represented a dramatic shift by further expanding the federal role with the creation of a “nationwide high-stakes accountability system” (Anderson, 2007, p. 161). In order to retain federal funds, states were mandated to adopt standards, develop standardized testing measures, and improve teacher quality. For the first time, the federal government required standardized tests to be given to students in third through eighth grades, and states had to adopt strict accountability systems based on test scores and a number of other factors. School districts were expected to meet minimum proficiency levels for their student body overall, as well as for students in specific subgroups, such as those who were disabled, economically disadvantaged, or from specified racial and ethnic groups. These proficiency levels were set to increase each year, with schools being held accountable for having all students at the proficient level by the 2013-2014 school year (Anderson, 2007; Shelly, 2011). Furthermore, schools that failed to make “Adequate Yearly Progress” would face a number of “corrective measures” (Anderson, 2007, p. 161).

Despite this huge federal step, lawmakers were careful to avoid calling for a specified standardized assessment system for fear it would lead to the creation of a national curriculum, which would be the final nail in the coffin of the appearance of state and local control. Furthermore, participation in NCLB was still technically optional; however, since it was tied to huge amounts of federal funding, nearly all 50 states opted in and implemented most, if not all, of the act’s measures (Shelly, 2011). As of 2006, the

state of Missouri had fully implemented 32 out of 38 measures and had partially implemented the remaining measures, putting it at 100% compliance (Shelly, 2011).

Current Legislation

Soon after the passage of NCLB, critics pointed out problems with the legislation. First, as with the federal mandates from prior decades, federal funding was not aligned with the ambitious measures (Fast, 2016). Furthermore, it became clear the proficiency standards were unrealistic. States soon realized a majority of their schools districts would eventually fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress as the required levels of proficiency neared the 100% mark. President Barack Obama responded to these criticisms of NCLB in 2012 and began “granting flexibility to states regarding specific requirements of NCLB in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction, and increase outcomes for all students” (United States Department of Education, 2017b, para. 13). Congress followed suite and passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, which is in effect as of today. Under ESSA, standardized testing continues to be used as part of the federal accountability measures, though state flexibility is retained. One promising feature for high-achieving student is the encouragement for states to move toward measuring student growth as part of these assessments, instead of focusing on moving students to specified levels of proficiency. This includes high-achieving students who were already scoring in advanced categories (Petrilli et al., 2016).

As part of these changes in federal mandates, Missouri revised the accountability measures to assess student growth as part of the standardized assessment measurements. The new model predicts how much a student’s test score would be expected to increase

from one year to the next based on statistical calculations, and then computes whether or not students achieved the anticipated amount of growth (DESE, 2013). While this may be a step in the right direction for holding schools accountable for meeting the academic needs of high achieving students, some point out that Missouri could be doing more. Specifically, Petrilli et al. (2016) argued that Missouri does not put enough weight on student growth as part of each district's summative rating, nor does the state look at gifted students and/or high achievers as specific subcategories.

Summary

Over time, there has been a tug-of-war between local, state, and federal agencies for oversight of the Missouri public school system. From the early days of locally controlled one-room schoolhouses on the prairie to a growing state with 10,000 school districts to the modern era of high-stakes federal educational reforms, the system has continually evolved. It has responded to the needs of its students, the desires of its citizens, the availability of funding, and the mandates passed down by state and federal bodies. While no one can be sure what the future of the system looks like, one can expect it to continue to change and evolve, as the national education climate does.

Leadership Analysis

When looking at the history of public schools, one can see a clear power struggle over who should control and influence them. School districts have some decision-making power at the local level; however, they must be responsive to state and federal mandates. In the state of Missouri, leadership is provided on the federal, state, and local levels, providing oversight into the management of the public school system. In this way, the leadership is bureaucratic, with a functional hierarchy in place. Manning (2013) said

two of the strengths of bureaucratic systems are that they “seek to build order and rationality by imposing a structure from external sources,” and they “can provide measurable units for accountability and planning processes” (p. 113). Public schools have oversight from local, state, and federal agencies, which oversee some elements of the planning, organization, and accountability measures. This provides stability and order for the entire system, meaning a student can move from a public school in urban California to one in rural Missouri and expect to find some familiarity.

Unfortunately, efforts to dramatically change the curriculum, instruction, and organization of schools (perhaps for the benefit of high-achieving students, for example) are hampered by some of the weaknesses of a bureaucracy. Manning (2013) contended that bureaucracies hamper innovation due to the organizational structure, they tend to stagnate around “ideal types of organization,” and they “cannot account for the less tangible, hard to measure products” (p. 113). For schools, leaders like Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and John Dewey inspired these ideals and shaped the face of public schools to this day. With these centuries-old traditions in place and a firm organizational structure, public schools are less likely to innovate and make changes, especially if the outcomes are hard to measure (such as engagement or academic growth).

Federal Leadership

At the federal level, oversight of public schools comes from the United States Department of Education. President Jimmy Carter called for the creation of this cabinet-level department and signed the legislation providing its initial organization and budget (McAndrews, 2006). The department’s mission includes four areas:

(a) establishing policies on federal financial aid for education, and distributing as well as monitoring those funds; (b) collecting data on America's schools and disseminating research; (c) focusing national attention on key educational issues; (d) prohibiting discrimination and ensuring equal access to education. (United States Department of Education, 2017a, para. 2)

According to the United States Department of Education (2017c), funding for public elementary and secondary schools primarily comes from the state and federal level; however, approximately 8% of school funding comes from the federal level, which is overseen by the Department of Education. In order to receive funds, school districts must follow federal mandates relating to items such as accountability and civil rights protections. Major pieces of federal legislation, such as NCLB and ESSA, dictate some of these policy agendas.

State Leadership

At the state level, the state Board of Education and the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) are responsible for overseeing public schools by shaping policy decisions and maintaining funding. According to DESE, during the 2016-2017 school year, almost 6 billion dollars was spent to educate approximately 900,000 students in 567 school districts across the state (2017d).

The state Board of Education is a unit comprised of members appointed by the governor and selected from different regions from the state while maintaining a balance of political party representation (Missouri Const. art. IX, § 5). This body is formally responsible for the supervision of instruction in Missouri public schools by setting the policies that guide DESE. This includes creating procedures for the accreditation of

school districts, establishing certification requirements for school educators, setting educational standards and determining the assessment of those standards, and overseeing budgetary matters (DESE, 2017a). Finally, this board selects the person who serves as the Commissioner of Education for the state (Missouri Const. art. IX, § 5).

DESE falls within the executive branch of the state government (Missouri Const. art. IV, § 12). This department is responsible for enacting the policies set by the state Board of Education, which includes tasks such as managing the Missouri School Improvement Program, overseeing teacher education programs and maintaining records of teacher certification, and ensuring Missouri learning standards align with federal policy (DESE, 2017d).

Local Leadership

At the local level, district school boards provide leadership. According to the National School Board Association (2017), “School boards, elected or appointed by their communities, represent the community’s beliefs and values” (para. 5). School board members come from the community they serve and act as a liaison between the citizens and the district administration. School boards shape policy decisions and funding decisions, acting as an “education watch dog, ensuring tax payers get the most for their tax dollars” (National School Board Association, 2017, para. 6).

Summary

These federal, state, and local agencies provide much insight for the leadership of public schools in the state of Missouri. They operate as what Weick (1978/1983) described as a *loosely coupled system*. He stated that the metaphor of loose coupling “conveys the image that coupled events are responsive, but that each event also preserves

its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness” (p. 18). While there is some form of organization and hierarchy from one level to the next for public schools, there is not a direct chain of command that dictates the leadership and decision making for all areas. One benefit of this is “if all of the elements in a large system are loosely couple to one another, then any one element can adjust to and modify a local unique contingency without affecting the whole system” (Weick, 1978/1983, p. 22). Thus, local control remains at the heart of public education, despite the state and federal oversight. Within a school district, educators and administrators can identify elements that need to be changed and come up with solutions that fit their unique situations, as long as those solutions fit within policies laid out by their local school boards and fit with state and federal policies.

Organizational Analysis

At the district level, educators and districts are mindful of the agendas put in place by their local, state, and federal agencies; similarly, within each district, a hierarchy of control exists. The work of Mintzberg (1979/2005) provides insight into the organizational structures at the district level. Mintzberg described organizations as consisting of five basic parts: the strategic apex, the middle line, the operating core, the technostructure, and the support staff.

At the top of the hierarchy stands the strategic apex, those people “charged with ensuring that the organization serves its mission in an effective way, and also that it serves the needs of the people who control or otherwise have power over the organization” (Mintzberg, 1979/2005, p. 223). In a school district, the strategic apex would include the central office administration team, including the superintendent and the

directors and assistants that serve under him/her. According to Mintzberg (1979/2005), the strategic apex is responsible for allocating resources, handling disputes, and disseminating information. Bolman and Deal (2013) would describe these activities as part of the structural frame, which is concerned with the design of the organization. Bolman and Deal (2013) stated that one of the assumptions of the structural frame is, “Suitable forms of coordination and control ensure that diverse efforts of individuals and units mesh” (p. 45). The next set of duties for the strategic apex involves what Bolman and Deal (2013) described as the symbolic frame, which is concerned with elements such as rituals, culture, visions, and stories. In these duties, the strategic apex serves as spokesman and figurehead and symbolically represents the whole of the organization. Ideally, the superintendent creates a strong, positive culture. As Bolman and Deal (2013) noted, “Culture forms the superglue that bonds an organization, unites people, and helps an enterprise to accomplish desired ends” (p. 248). For high achievers to experience a substantial shift in classroom practices, the leaders who are part of the strategic apex would need to consider systemic, district-wide changes.

While the strategic apex makes many decisions and represents the organization, this group does not provide much of the direct leadership for the workers in the organization. Those tasks are left to a group Mintzberg (1979/2005) called the middle line, which is responsible for direct oversight of their operating unit. In schools, the middle line is made up of principals and vice-principals. These leaders help ensure the goals of the superintendent are carried out by the teachers they oversee. Larger organizations will have more members in the middle line group, creating a hierarchy. The middle line group works heavily in Bolman and Deal’s (2013) human resource

frame, which is involved with the “relationship between people and organizations” (p. 135). The middle line works more directly with the workers than the strategic apex does; therefore, these leaders are more aware of the needs of the work staff, the group dynamics, and how the work staff is responding to the organization’s goals. In a school system, principals may evaluate teachers, facilitate discussions, and communicate about district initiatives as part of their human resource role. Middle line leaders could also greatly impact the classroom experiences of high achievers by providing ideas and guidelines for teachers to implement.

The largest part of many organizations will be the operating core, which Mintzberg (1979/2005) described as those “who perform the basic work related directly to the production of products and services” (p. 223). In schools, the operating core consists of the teachers who provide the educational services. As Mintzberg pointed out, “Since it is the operating core that the other parts of the organization seek to protect, standardization is generally carried furthest here” (p. 223). In looking at the academic experiences of highly able students, it is this very standardization that could be problematic. While some schools may have solid systems in place that help differentiate the curriculum and instruction for high-achieving students, many other districts may place more of an emphasis on standardization. Those high achievers who benefit from differentiated instruction may find it isolated to a single teacher or a single building within a school district if such decisions are made by the operating core instead of the strategic apex or middle line.

Within an organization, a number of analysts help to create this standardization. Mintzberg (1979/2005) called this group the technostructure. He stated, “These analysts

are removed from the operating work flow [however] they may design it, plan it, change it, or train the people who do it” (p. 227). Within a public school, instructional coaches may best represent the technostructure. As superintendents and principals make decisions regarding curriculum and instructional practices, it is the instructional coaches who help the operating core carry out these changes through planning, observing, and training. This is related to Taylor’s (1916/2005) theory of scientific management. He saw the need for managers who could collect the organizational knowledge and train the workforce in the best methods and procedures. Taylor noted that this knowledge previously remained in the “heads of the workmen” (p. 65), while he advocated for managers and analysts to bring that information forward, where it could be cataloged and shared. Similarly, instructional coaches help to identify and share the best practices of master teachers, allowing new or struggling teachers to improve more rapidly. Smaller school districts are less likely to have instructional coaches, while larger school districts may have entire departments that provide these services. In their roles, instructional coaches may need to draw the most from Bolman and Deal’s (2013) political frame as they navigate the ecosystem of their school building and district. Bolman and Deal stated, “Scarce resources and enduring differences put conflict at the center of day-to-day dynamics and make power the most important asset” (p. 189). Instructional coaches have to figure out how to manage these conflicts while paying attention to the power dynamics of the teaching staff. Leaders at this level could also reshape the learning experiences for high achievers by sharing and modeling supportive classroom practices.

Mintzberg’s (1979/2005) final organizational grouping is the support staff. These members perform a wide range of tasks necessary to the functioning of the organization.

In the school organization, this would include such items as custodial work, human resource operations, and technology support. These function to the side of the operating core, with little to no control of the operating core.

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

This study sought to describe the lived experiences of high-achieving elementary students in the state of Missouri, with a specific focus on the classroom structures that support and hinder these students. Tomlinson (2005) stated that highly able students could benefit from differentiated instruction with the inclusion of more challenging content, the ability to move at a quicker pace, and the opportunity for students to connect learning to their own passions. By asking students, parents, and teachers about the experiences of high-achieving students, this study identified some supportive practices and some practices to avoid. This data will be shared with practitioners in Missouri public schools.

First, the findings of this study will be shared with scholars and practitioners by contributing to the body of research. A gap in the existing literature has been identified. Much of the existing literature focuses on gifted students, which may or may not overlap with the experiences of high-achieving students. Furthermore, several quantitative studies identified the existing problem, but these studies do not give voice to the high-achieving students by exploring their lived experiences. This study painted a picture of the essence of these experiences by gathering data from students, parents, and teachers about the experiences of high-achieving elementary students in Missouri public schools. These findings will be submitted to scholarly publications, helping to fill the gap in the literature.

Second, the findings of this study will be shared with practitioners through presentations at workshops and teaching conferences, with the ultimate goal of presenting at the Powerful Learning Conference. Hosted by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education each January, this conference brings together teachers, administrators, and educational leaders from across the state to discuss a number of educational issues and to share exemplary practices. Practitioners attending the conference would likely be interested in the research topic and be willing and able to influence educational practices in their district.

Since high-achieving students often look like model students, teachers may not realize their needs are not being met; therefore, it is imperative to share the students' experiences and voices with practitioners. Cervero and Wilson (2006) stated, "People at physical and metaphorical planning tables plan educational programs" (p. 18), and planners must think about whose needs and interests are represented at these tables—and, most importantly, whose are not. This study helps provide high-achieving students a seat at the planning table by giving voice to their experience and identifying the classroom structures that best support them and by describing which classroom structures most hinder them. Taking this information directly to practitioners can make them more aware of the needs of these students and more able to successfully attempt to meet these needs.

Section 3:
Scholarly Review for the Study

In Sir Ken Robinson's (2010) seminal talk *Changing School Paradigms*, he challenged the so-called *factory model* of education in which students are sorted into grade levels based on their age. He asked, "Why is there this assumption that the most important thing kids have in common is how old they are? It's like the most important thing about them is their date of manufacture." Once plucked and sorted at the entrance of kindergarten, students are then provided a lock-step curriculum through much of their school years, with few chances to deviate from their peers (especially in the elementary years). Archambault et al. (1993) conducted a national survey of teachers to analyze the status of classroom practices utilized with gifted students. They found little variation in the instruction of advanced learners. Two decades after Archambault et al.'s study, Assouline et al. (2013) conducted a survey of gifted students and, again, found that little to no differentiation was provided for these students.

While much of the literature about advanced students focuses on those identified as gifted, there is a broader category of students who are high achievers though not formally identified as gifted. High-achieving students may or may not be in gifted programs; however, their classroom performance demonstrates the need for an advanced curriculum, as their learning needs outpace their age-based peers. Differentiating instruction is one way to meet the needs of these learners by providing an appropriate pace, an adequate challenge, and allowing students to pursue their passions (Tomlinson, 2005).

Historically, schools have attempted to meet the needs of advanced learners in different ways, including tracking, acceleration, cluster grouping, differentiated learning, and personalized learning, just to name a few (Assouline et al., 2013). Despite what is

known from research about the needs of high-achieving students, national and state education reforms have not taken these students into account, focusing instead on moving struggling students up to proficiency (Loveless, Farkas, & Duffett, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016). Those falling just below proficiency are considered *bubble students*, and teachers are expected to help push these students over the bubble and into the proficient category (Rothstein, 2008). According to a survey of teachers, 63% said struggling students get the most overall attention (Farkas & Duffett, 2008). This push can leave high achievers languishing in classrooms, sitting on the sidelines as their teachers focus on other students. Inadequately considering their needs could decrease their engagement in school, have an economic impact as they leave the school system, and be a social justice issue, especially for low-income and minority students (Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker, Giancol et al., 2015).

Much has been written about gifted students and differentiating instruction for highly able students; however, a review of literature revealed no studies about the lived experiences of high-achieving elementary students. Quantitative studies have shown that schools are not adequately providing advanced instruction for advanced students, but what does this feel like for the young student who is not having his/her academic needs met? Furthermore, if students have received differentiated instruction, how did they feel about this as compared to whole class instruction? While research shows differentiation to be beneficial, hearing the students' voices regarding it would fill a gap in the literature and impact educational practices. In developing research studies, Colquitt and George (2011) recommended finding a novel topic, one that provides "new insights not articulated by prior voices" (p. 433). In order to understand the academic needs of high-

achieving elementary students, their voices need to be added to the body of literature. As Danaher and Briod (2005) stated, “The unit of phenomenology is found in the manner that method is conceived in such close relationship to the subject matter: meaningful experience” (p. 217). Interviewing high-achieving elementary students will add their experiences and insights to the existing qualitative and quantitative research, truly giving these students a voice.

Furthermore, Colquitt and George (2011) recommended conducting research that leads to actionable results and offers “insights for managerial or organizational practice” (p. 434). The high-achieving students in this study shared their perceptions about which elements of curriculum and instruction best meet their needs and which ones leave them feeling dissatisfied with their learning opportunities, something not covered in the existing literature. This insight could change instruction practices by providing practicing educators additional insights into their students’ experiences. On some level, many teachers assume good students are doing fine since they are not struggling academically; however, high-achieving elementary students may be dissatisfied with their educational opportunities. Understanding this mindset and hearing from students about which instructional practices support them and which do not should impact educational practices.

This review of literature will begin by describing how to identify high-achieving students, making a distinction between high-achieving and gifted students. The next section will discuss the learning needs of high achievers and describing how they could benefit from differentiated instruction, which would alter the pacing, the degree of challenge, and the level of engagement for these students. Next, the current status of

these students will be explored by discussing survey data, assessment data, and educational policies. The final section will describe the effects of not meeting the needs of high-achieving students, including disengagement, impacts on their future careers and the economy, and the specific impacts on low-income and minority students.

Identifying High-Achieving Students

Delineating gifted or high-achieving students has traditionally been a difficult task because no single definition is utilized by school districts, researchers, state education departments, or policy makers (Burney, 2008; Reis, 2004). However, students are given these labels, based on various characteristics. Not all gifted students are high achievers and not all high achievers are gifted; therefore, it is useful to differentiate between the two when discussing their academic needs.

Defining Gifted

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), an organization tasked with representing the needs and interests of gifted students across the nation, proposed this definition of giftedness: “Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains” (2010, p. 1). This description leaves significant latitude for others to decide how aptitude and competence are assessed and measured.

Since this study focuses on students in the state of Missouri, it is relevant to look at how the Missouri State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) identifies gifted students. Section 162.675. RSMo of Missouri law is used as a basis, and it defines gifted students as:

those children who exhibit precocious development of mental capacity and learning potential as determined by competent professional evaluation to the extent that continued educational growth and stimulation could best be served by an academic environment beyond that offered through a standard grade level curriculum. (DESE, 2017b, p. 3)

DESE (2017b) provides more specific guidelines for how districts should identify students eligible for state-recognized gifted education programs. School districts are required to incorporate three of these four elements: (a) a measure of intelligence or mental ability with qualifying scores set at the 95th percentile or above; (b) a measure of academic ability with a 95th percentile cutoff; (c) a measure of creativity, reasoning, or problem-solving abilities (with no specific score described; however, districts must get DESE approval for the process they select); and (d) a final, less-defined measurement to be determined by the school (this could be a portfolio of work, fine arts auditions, teacher evaluations, or some other assessment). School districts have the latitude to set the qualification scores higher than those outlined by DESE. As of the 2015-2016 school year, 231 districts across the state served over 39,000 students in qualifying gifted programs (DESE, 2015). There are 567 school districts in the state, which means the majority of districts do not have specific gifted programs approved by DESE.

While NAGC (2010) and DESE (2017b) have suggested guidelines for identifying gifted students, this study is looking at a broader category of students who are high achievers. Gifted programs in Missouri focus only on the top 5th percentile of students, more or less, with some schools setting an even higher cutoff for selection (DESE, 2017b). While these students may be benefiting from their participation in gifted

programs, there are other students with high abilities who are not in such programs. This could be due to the absence of a gifted program in their schools, their failure to meet their district's criteria for entering the gifted program, or missing out on the initial screening process for one reason or another. Therefore, there are many students in the state who are not benefitting from a gifted program who are highly capable and show great promise in the classroom.

Defining High Achieving

In order to delineate high-achieving students, some researchers have used standardized assessment scoring categories as identifiers. Loveless (2008) conducted a quantitative study of national assessment data to analyze the effects of the No Child Left Behind legislation on achievement. He defined high achievers as those who scored in the 90th percentile or above on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Less than a decade later, Petrilli et al. (2016) evaluated the effects of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) by gathering quantitative data about state accountability measures. Petrilli et al. (2016) defined high achievers as those who scored in the advanced level on state assessments (which vary from state to state). Neither Loveless nor Petrilli et al. spoke of “gifted” as a distinct category and opted to base their determination of “high achievement” on standardized assessment scores.

Readiness versus Ability

While school administrators and researchers utilize intelligence tests and achievement tests to delineate gifted and high-achieving students, there is a call for a more fluid way to identify these students, based more on classroom performance than standardized tests. Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) argued teachers should look beyond

students' abilities (as identified on intelligence tests) and instead look at students' readiness to learn the specified content. They stated, "*Readiness* is *not* a synonym for *ability*" (p. 86). While intelligence speaks to abstract abilities, this does not mean gifted students are necessarily the most academically advanced in all areas. Some may be advanced at writing, while struggling in mathematics, and vice versa. For this reason, Sousa and Tomlinson recommended using preassessments at the beginning of the school year and at the beginning of each unit to determine which students already demonstrate mastery of the necessary knowledge and skills. These assessments can identify the high achievers, who may or may not overlap with the students previously identified as gifted.

Some students can have the ability to do well in school and, ultimately, underachieve by not meeting their potential. McCoach and Siegle (2003) conducted a quantitative study of gifted achievers and underachievers, comparing data from the School Attitude Assessment Survey-R. They found that underachievers and high achievers differed greatly in regard to the variables of motivation and goal valuation (the identification of goals they would like to pursue). Therefore, "the key features that distinguish gifted achievers from gifted underachievers are the goals they set for themselves and the effort they put forth to achieve those goals" (McCoach & Siegle, 2003, p. 151). In arguing for a school-based concept of giftedness, Cross and Coleman (2005) contended that effort and self-regulation should be part of the definition of giftedness. Students not showing academic achievement would no longer be designated as gifted. While Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) spoke of the academic readiness, McCoach and Siegle (2003) and Cross and Coleman described the defining personal characteristics necessary for achievement, in addition to academic ability. Therefore, schools should not

just focus on students identified as gifted and should, instead, look at how students are performing in the classroom.

Speaking from an economists' perspective instead of an educators' perspective, Peters and Matthews (2016) commented on several recent studies regarding gifted education research. They were struck by the findings of Card and Giuliano (2014), who found that students not identified as gifted actually benefitted more from gifted interventions than the students identified as gifted. Peters and Matthews stated, "We are concerned that gifted programs often are needlessly exclusive in their otherwise well-intentioned use of identification methods that cannot be supported from the standpoint of their ability to predict success in the program" (p. 151). Furthermore, Archambault et al. (1993) found that 49% of public school teachers felt they had gifted students in their classrooms who had not formally been identified as gifted. This adds further support for the notion of focusing on high achievers rather than students identified as gifted. By limiting advanced instruction to only students identified as gifted, schools are not meeting the needs of a wider range of students who could benefit greatly.

For the purposes of this study, a high-achieving student was defined as one who scores in advanced categories on the Missouri Assessment Program assessment and who predominately earned A's as letter grades (or the top category on a standards-based grading system). This definition incorporates the definitions of Loveless (2008) and Petrilli et al. (2016), who focused on standardized assessment data, as well as the work of Sousa and Tomlinson (2011), which focused on classroom demonstrations of ability.

High-Achieving Students as a Distinct Classification

While much of the existing literature regarding highly able students focuses on those classified as gifted, there is a need to make a distinction between gifted students and those who are high achievers. High achievers who those who demonstrate high performance in academic work and on standardized assessments—though they may fall outside of the levels required for participation in a gifted program (Loveless, 2008; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Petrilli et al., 2016; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). While gifted programs focus on aptitude and the ability to learn, Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) argued for a need to differentiation between readiness and ability, arguing that readiness was a more fluid concept that varied across academic areas and even from one unit of study to another. High achieving students are those that are ready to learn more than the classroom instruction is providing. Furthermore, high-achieving students have demonstrated personal characteristics regarding goal setting, effort, and self-regulation (Cross & Coleman, 2005; McCoach & Siegle, 2003).

Learning Needs of High-Achieving Students

Across the nation, schools have adopted the Professional Learning Communities model, as proposed by Rick DuFour. Within this model of school reform, districts are guided by four corollary questions to identify what students should be learning, how to assess student learning, how to address students who are not progressing, and how to address students who have already mastered the skills and content (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). The fourth critical question asks, “How can we extend and enrich the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency?” (DuFour et al., 2010, p. 119). In short, what do we do if students already know the skills and content we plan to

cover? This question has plagued schools for much of their history, and through the years schools have answered it in various ways.

Historical Approaches

Tieso (2003) presented an overview of the historical approaches to providing advanced instruction for high-achieving students. As early as the 1920s, researchers were analyzing whether it was advantageous to sort students by ability. Later, schools adopted rigid tracking systems, sorting students by ability and achievement and providing whole-class instruction tailored to those levels (Tieso, 2003). This fell out of favor as research showed it was ineffective and concerns were raised about racial disparities, as well as the fairness of the tracking system as a whole (Kulik, 1993).

Instead of sorting a whole grade of students for all instruction, the Joplin Plan was developed in the 1950s as a means of sorting students based on individual instructive needs in mathematics and reading (Tieso, 2003). During the block of time devoted to those subjects, “students would proceed to different classrooms to receive instruction geared toward their readiness levels” (Tieso, 2003, p. 30). The Joplin Plan was more fluid than traditional tracking systems since students were sorted based on their readiness in each subject instead of their overall intelligence, and they could move as their needs changed (Tieso, 2003). Despite these perceived benefits, the Joplin Plan was not widely adopted.

Ability grouping has not totally fallen by the wayside, as some schools use what is now called *cluster grouping* to provide advanced instruction (Tieso, 2003). As shown by Colangelo et al. (2004), this may be in a school-wide program similar to the Joplin Plan, or it may be small clusters within a grade level, with the group compositions

changing with each unit of instruction (for example, during a mathematics unit on adding fractions, students could be sorted into accelerated, regular, and remedial groupings for the duration of that unit, and they may be in different groups when the class moves on to multiplying fractions if their needs have changed).

While some teachers or school districts utilize ability groups as a means of providing advanced instruction, many researchers have found that most high-achieving students received most of their instruction within the bounds of a regular (mixed-ability) classroom (Archambault et al., 1993; Assouline et al., 2013; Colangelo et al., 2004; Coleman, Micko, & Cross, 2015; Plucker et al., 2015; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). Though high-ability students may be in the same classrooms along with their mixed-ability peers, some districts and teachers provide opportunities for advancement by utilizing differentiated instruction.

Differentiating Instruction

Differentiated instruction is one method of meeting the advanced needs of high achievers within the bounds of a regular classroom. Carol Ann Tomlinson is the preeminent researcher in the field. She argued, “Curriculum (what students learn) and instruction (how they learn it) should work in tandem to ensure that each student is consistently engaged with high-quality ideas and processes” (2005, p. 161). According to Sousa and Tomlinson (2011), teachers must respond to the individual needs of the learners, whether they be struggling or advanced students, in order for optimum learning to occur. To accomplish this, they recommended teachers frequently assess students to determine their needs and utilize flexible grouping to allow students to work with peers on similar levels. Sousa and Tomlinson proposed moving from a recall-based curriculum

to one that focuses more on problem solving, as this allows for more opportunities for differentiated instruction. Despite what is known about differentiating instruction, only 10% of teachers say high achievers are most likely to be taught with a curriculum targeted for their abilities, while 51% of struggling students receive such accommodations, according to Farkas and Duffett's (2008) survey of educators.

In order to differentiate instruction, Tomlinson (2005) outlined three areas necessary for meeting the needs of high-achieving students: (a) appropriate pacing, (b) degree of challenge, and (c) pursuit of passion. This conceptual framework forms the basis for this dissertation; therefore, it is necessary to analyze each of these items in more detail.

Appropriate pacing. Burney (2008) applied social cognitive theory to the education of highly able students. She stated, "The problem is that school curricula are geared for the average learner of a particular age. Able students need to have access to learning that is faster paced and more complex than what is usually available in a classroom of mixed abilities" (p. 130). While we may refer to this as accelerating the curriculum, for high achievers, the faster pace is actually more comfortable (Tomlinson, 2005). Furthermore, Tomlinson pointed out that the curriculum should not run out, leaving learners stranded with nothing new to learn; rather, it should "ensure that the accelerated student continually finds vital idea and skills awaiting him or her" (p. 163). This is echoed by Colangelo et al. (2004) who indicated that this may be an uncomfortable task for teachers, however, especially if the advanced student is mastering content several years beyond his/her classmates. After completing a meta-analysis of hundreds of studies regarding acceleration practices in the United States, Colangelo et al.

stated, “Acceleration is the most effective curriculum intervention for gifted children” (2004, p. 2). Acceleration may help high-achievers find appropriately paced curriculum.

Across school districts, pacing can be accelerated in myriad ways. Colangelo et al. (2004) described several options. The continuous progress method is when the teacher provides new materials as students need it, while self-paced instruction allows students to navigate all materials at their own pace. With subject-matter acceleration (or partial acceleration), students may move up to higher-grade levels in content areas, as needed. Curriculum compacting allows students to cover easier materials more quickly, leaving time for enrichment. Finally, with a telescoping curriculum, students cover multiple years of material in shorter times and move on to advanced grades (Colangelo et al., 2004). While many people associate acceleration with grade skipping, these researchers have shown several ways to accelerate instruction without having students skip grades.

Degree of challenge. Vygotsky’s (1978) landmark theory of how the learning process works described the space between a student’s actual development level and their potential as the “zone of proximal development” (p. 86). Vygotsky contended, in order for students to achieve their potential, they often need to be challenged “through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Therefore, the role of the teacher is to help spur the leap between what the child already can do and what the child is capable of doing. If the classroom materials are too easy, children are prevented from making these learning leaps; thus, children need to be exposed to challenging curriculum and instruction (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Tomlinson, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978).

Roberson (1998) synthesized several major learning theories including those proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Roberson (1998) pointed out that these theories converged around the idea that students experience disruption and disequilibrium as they extend beyond their development level, “which must be dealt with in order to move forward and grow as a learner. Disruption is needed to stimulate and engage the student” (p. 293). Ultimately, adequate challenge creates optimum learning. People enjoy the feeling of navigating tasks just beyond their developmental levels. In 1990, Csikszentmihalyi proposed his theory of *flow*, stating that the optimal experience is one “when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (p. 3). Applying Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory to gifted education, Burney (2008) contended these students must face challenge in order to experience “the intrinsic motivation of learning for the joy of the process and the stimulation” (p. 135), which is what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) would describe as “challenges to improve ourselves” (p. 3).

Similarly, Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) showed how the appeal of challenge connects to what is known about brain science. They stated, “When information and patterns produce an emotional ‘Aha!’ chemicals are released that stimulated the brain’s reward system and keep us motivated to continue learning” (p. 14). Several studies have found that students can identify this feeling, and they perceive it to be part of the process of learning (Armstrong, 2015; Eddles-Hirsh, Vialle, Rogers, & McCormick., 2015; Scager, Akkerman, Pilot, & Wubbels, 2014).

Challenge has to be provided for students at an appropriate level in order for students to benefit from classroom instruction and activities. Csikszentmihalyi (1990)

described what happens when there is a lack of challenge, stating, “One cannot enjoy doing the same thing at the same level for long. We grow either bored or frustrated” (p. 75). Conversely, he showed that challenges far beyond our abilities lead to feelings of anxiety. Therefore, the optimal challenge level must be just right in order to lead to “higher levels of performance” (p. 74). Scager et al. (2014) demonstrated the implications of appropriate challenges in the classroom, finding that students increased their effort when the coursework was beyond their current level. Therefore, the challenge for teachers is to keep learning tasks from being too easy or too difficult for students. Tomlinson (2005) stated, “Ensuring challenge calibrated to the particular needs of a learner at a particular time is one of the most essential roles of the teacher and appears nonnegotiable for student growth” (p. 163).

Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) proposed that teachers could increase challenge by differentiating the curriculum’s content, process, and product. To vary content, teachers could provide options like an advanced spelling list or additional in-depth concepts added to the regular science unit. To vary process, teachers could require students to do fewer math problems as homework once they have demonstrated mastery or allow students to utilize a learning contract/menu of options for each unit. Finally, to vary the product involves having students create more complex demonstrations of their content mastery, perhaps by building a model or raising the expectations for their essays.

Pursuit of passion. Tomlinson (2005) proposed pursuit of passion as the third hallmark of quality curriculum and instruction for high achievers. She stated this type of instruction is evident by the following:

characterized by student choice; an action orientation; engagement with authentic ideas, problems, and audiences; high personal relevance; complexity; demand for creativity; development of advanced level skills; critical feedback from knowledgeable audiences; and hon[ing] of attitudes and habits necessary for self-directed learning. (p. 164)

An emphasis on individual passion is contrary to the nation's standardization movement in education. As Robinson (2010) stated, education is "essentially about conformity, and increasingly, it is about that if you look at the growth of standardized testing and standardized curricula. I believe we've got to go in the exact opposite direction." He issued a call for a change in paradigms, one that allows students to pursue creativity, divergent thinking, and the pursuit of passion in order for schools to rise to the levels of stimulation available elsewhere in children's lives.

As with the role of challenge in learning, appeals to students' passions can foster more enjoyable learning experiences by increasing motivation and engagement. After interviewing hundreds of experts in various fields, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) concluded that optimal experiences are often accompanied by enjoyment, which he described as occurring "when a person has not only met some prior expectation or satisfied a need or desire but also gone beyond what he or she has been programmed to do and achieved something unexpected, perhaps something even unimagined before" (p. 46). Garn and Jolly (2014) interviewed high ability students and found students showed more satisfaction in school when their instruction was more personalized and more aligned to their own long-term goals. Hagenauer and Hascher's (2014) longitudinal quantitative study measured the association between achievement and enjoyment, finding a direct

relationship between the two. As enjoyment increases, so does achievement. While this study does not prove causality, the researchers concluded, “Enjoyment is a necessary precondition for learners’ stable and enduring interest in lifelong learning” (p. 27).

Therefore, passion and enjoyment enhance the learning experience.

Why Teachers Do Not Differentiate Instruction

Despite research showing the benefits of differentiation, it is clearly not being utilized extensively. VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2005) examined the myriad barriers faced by schools and classrooms. The difficulties in planning for differentiation are part of the problem, with teachers lacking in knowledge, time, and materials to prepare for multiple-leveled lessons. Classroom management skills can also be a barrier, with differentiation often requiring “mobility in the classroom, the use of learning centers, and careful record keeping” (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005, p. 212). These findings are also reflected in Farkas and Duffett’s (2008) survey of teachers, which found that 84% of teachers felt differentiation was hard to implement.

High Achievers have Distinct Learning Needs

High-achieving students are able to learn more readily than their classmates; however, schools have had a difficult time deciding how best to meet their academic needs. In the past, tracking systems were utilized to sort students by ability (Tieso, 2003), but this has fallen out of favor. Today, high-achieving students receive almost all of their instruction in regular classrooms, with little to no differentiation based on their readiness or ability (Archambault et al., 1993; Assouline et al., 2013; Colangelo et al., 2004; Coleman et al., 2015; Plucker et al., 2015; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). Within a regular classroom, differentiated instruction is one way to meet the needs of

high ability learners. Tomlinson (2005) said these students would benefit from a faster pace of instruction, more challenging work, and the chance to pursue their passions. However, teachers and schools have been reluctant to implement these changes (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005)

The Status of High-Achieving Students

During the Space Race of the 1960s, there was a strong push from the federal government to increase the educational opportunities of high-ability students in the areas of mathematics and science; however, in the years since, the focus turned toward the students who were struggling to reach basic and proficient academic levels (Anderson, 2007). What effect has this had on the status of high-achieving students? Whether surveying teachers and students, analyzing assessment data, or reviewing state accountability measures, the results continually show an educational system that does not prioritize or meet their academic needs (Archambault et al., 1993; Assouline et al., 2013; Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Loveless, 2008).

Quantitative Survey Data

In 1993, Archambault et al. conducted a landmark survey of almost 4,000 elementary teachers across the nation to analyze the methods utilized to meet the needs of advanced students within the regular classroom. They found “a disturbing picture” in which teachers only make “minor modifications in curriculum and instruction” (Archambault et al., 1993, p. xii). Gifted students were generally not treated any differently from their peers and were not offered opportunities for advancement or differentiation. When asked about 39 instructional accommodations, teachers reported using these very infrequently for either gifted students or non-gifted students, nor did

they say their school districts provided opportunities to receive advanced instruction in other ways, with only 55% reporting in-school pullout programs (Archambault et al., 1993).

Fifteen years after Archambault et al. (1993), Farkas and Duffett (2008) conducted a national survey of 900 teachers. Almost one-third of teachers said academically advanced students were a low priority, and 73% of teachers agreed with that these students were “bored and under-challenged...[and] not given a sufficient chance to thrive” (p. 52). Even though teachers saw that the needs of high-achieving students were not being met, they did not show strong support for differentiating instruction, with 83% saying it is difficult to implement. Instead of differentiating in the classrooms, teachers express strong support for magnet schools, homogeneous classes, and subject acceleration. One intervention teachers do not support is grade skipping, with 63% opposing this option (Farkas & Duffett, 2008).

When students were asked about their school structures, they echoed the findings of Archambault et al.’s (1993) and Farkas and Duffett’s (2008) surveys of teachers. Assouline et al.’s (2013) survey of over 6000 high-ability elementary students (as identified through national talent search program) found that nearly 7 out of 10 were receiving their primary instruction in the regular classroom, with only 3 in 10 receiving some form of differentiation, primarily in math. In the realm of math, grade skipping or attending a pullout class were options available to 25% of 4th graders and almost 34% of 6th graders, but these options are even less likely to be offered in language arts or science.

Assessment Data

Since the turn of the 21st century, the nation adopted two major pieces of educational reform at the federal level: the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2002 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) legislation in 2015 (Jacob, 2017). While these reforms sought to improve educational outcomes (mostly evaluated through standardized testing), the results have been mixed, especially for high achievers.

One of the problems of NCLB was the emphasis on moving struggling students up to proficiency. According to Farkas and Duffett's (2008) teacher survey, 78% of teachers agreed with this statement: "Getting underachieving students to reach 'proficiency' has become so important that the needs of advanced students take a back seat" (p. 61). This is reflected in the assessment data. Loveless (2008) compared NAEP scores for high-achieving and low-achieving students (as defined by being in the 90th percentile or above and the 10th percentile or below) for the years after NCLB was enacted. Between 2000-2007, fourth grade low achievers showed greater gains on the assessment tests in reading and in mathematics than the high achievers, and the scores of both groups stagnated after an initial increase. Watkins and Sheng's (2008) analysis of students' scores on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test found similar results on the state level. The researchers stated, "Advanced learners are not making adequate achievement gains as they advance from earlier elementary grades to later grade levels" (p. 1). The number of students scoring in the *exceeds proficiency* category dropped 13% in reading from the elementary grades to the junior high grades and 19% in mathematics between third and fifth grades (some of this drop was recovered, however, with a 10% gain recorded by eighth grade).

Educational Policies

In the 25 years since Archambault et al.'s (1993) study, the situation for advanced students has not seen substantial improvement (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Loveless, 2008; Watkins & Sheng, 2008), with most high-ability students receiving the majority of their instruction in the regular classroom. This is due, in part, to the educational policies set at the state and local levels.

Plucker et al. (2015) analyzed state policies and practices regarding high-ability students, as well as assessment data. This study considered items such as early entrance to kindergarten, acceleration (grade skipping), teacher training in gifted education, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, and state funding to support high-achieving students. Overall, they summarized, "In most states, attention to advanced learning is incomplete and haphazard....[and] policy support for advanced learning was weak in the vast majority of states" (p. 14). Missouri earned a C in the *state emphases* category (referring to legislative educational policies) arena and a D+ for outcomes on national assessments.

Accelerating advanced learners is one way to provide advanced curriculum and instruction, but state educational policies have not embraced this solution. Colangelo et al. (2004) argued that acceleration is more economical and helped teachers meet students' needs; however, Plucker et al. (2015) showed that 22 states have no educational policy regarding acceleration (which allows students to move skip grades or receive compacted instruction) and one state does not permit it. Nine states have a policy permitting acceleration, while 19 states leave it to the local educational authorities to determine.

Similarly, Petrilli et al. (2016) analyzed state reform efforts to see if states were including high achievers in their accountability measures after the passage of the ESSA legislation. They argued that states should “devise accountability systems that deal with the ceiling as well as the floor” (p. 5) out of concern for equity and for excellence. Petrilli et al. scored state accountability measures on four criteria: (a) inclusion of advanced categories of assessment data, (b) inclusion of true growth models that measure all students’ academic growth, (c) identification of high-achieving students as a specific subgroup, and (d) making growth count for at least half of school ratings (in the states that utilize a rating system). By these measures, their analysis concluded that only four states have outstanding systems for accountability with regards to high achievers. Of the four criteria, the state of Missouri earned credit for two (Petrilli et al., 2016). With a lack of accountability through local, state, and federal education reforms, high-achieving students are not a priority, meaning schools have less incentive to focus on meeting their needs.

High Achievers on the Sidelines

Despite what is known about the learning needs of high-achieving students and the importance of differentiation, surveys of teachers and students show these high-achieving students’ needs are not being met (Archambault et al., 1993; Farkas & Duffett, 2008). Teachers admit these students are a low priority and recognize that they may be bored and under-challenged (Farkas & Duffett, 2008), and students report they are not offered much differentiation or challenge in their classes (Assouline et al., 2013). This lack of challenge is reflected in the academic growth demonstrated by students on standardized assessments. Multiple data points show stagnation in academic gains in

recent years among high-ability learners (Loveless, 2008; Watkins & Sheng, 2008).

Furthermore, even in this era of educational reform, there has not been a major push for federal or state policies to support high achievers (Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015). This analysis of the research makes it clear high achievers scholars are on the sidelines, despite their great potential.

Effects of Not Meeting the Needs of High-Achieving Students

In a synthesis of 25 years of research on gifted students' school experiences, Coleman et al. (2015) included the phrase "ready child, unprepared school," which seems to summarize the school experience for many high-achieving students (p. 366). They are ready and able to learn, but the research shows schools are not prepared to meet their needs (Archambault et al., 1993; Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016). What then happens to these students? Unfortunately, some become disengaged in the educational process. Furthermore, not offering our advanced students advanced curriculums can have an impact on their college and career goals, as well as a negative effect on our economy. Finally, for the students who happen to also be a minority and/or living in poverty, the lack of access to an appropriate education becomes a social justice issue.

Disengagement

Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) stated, "Learning is the opposite of boredom, [and] learning is the antidote to boredom" (p. 2). What happens when a student already knows the content or has mastered the skills being presented day after day in their classrooms? If their schools are not offering high-achieving students an advanced curriculum, these students spend portions of their school days waiting on their teachers

and peers. Research by Peine and Coleman (2010) found this was a common phenomenon for gifted students as they waited for new instruction and waited after finishing assignments more quickly than their classmates. While some students are content to read or otherwise occupy themselves, others are not. In interviews with over 100 high-ability students, Thorkildsen (1993) found that only 14% felt requiring fast learners to sit and wait was fair.

When students are not engaged in learning, they are likely to consider school boring. After interviewing gifted high school underachievers, Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) determined these students desired “complexity in their learning experiences. They sought novel, authentic, abstract, open-ended experiences and felt the familiar, artificial, concrete, decontextualized, simplistic nature of most assigned work contributed to their boredom” (p. 24). For these students, the lack of challenge (along with other factors) led to a disengagement from the learning process and an underachievement in coursework.

A lack of engagement can also lead to dropping out. Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) described a study by Bridgeland et al. (2006), which surveyed approximately 500 students who dropped out of high school. This study reported that “47 percent of the students surveyed said the main and most frequently cited reason they dropped out of school was that they did not find their classes interesting” (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011, p. 111). Similarly, Hansen and Toso’s (2007) qualitative study included interviews with 14 gifted students who had dropped out. They found that “nearly all of the dropouts in the study shared frustration with low-level challenges in school” (p. 38), and many stated these feelings started as far back as elementary school. While there are myriad reasons for students making the choice to drop out, for many students, the school experience left

a lot to be desired. While dropping out may have the most severe impact on students' career goals and on our nation's economy, a lack of engagement in school can impact careers and the economy in other ways, as well.

Impact on Careers and Economy

In recent years, there has been a push for greater science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) instruction in order to prepare the nation's students to compete on the global stage, with jobs in STEM fields expected to expand over the next decade in the United States (Vilorio, 2014). And yet, our nation's students who are gifted and talented in those fields are not likely to be exposed to advanced curriculums, instead staying in lock step with their peers. Assouline et al. (2013) reported that 90% of fifth graders were receiving science instruction in their regular classroom with little opportunities for advancement; thus, "differentiation in science is virtually nonexistent" (p. 145) at an age when it is critical for students to develop an interest and skills in those arenas.

Farkas and Duffett's (2008) survey of teachers found that 81% believed high-achieving students need special attention since "their talents will enable us to compete in a global economy" (p. 57). As those students grow up, they may miss out on STEM jobs or lose out on them to more advanced students from across the world, and the nation is less likely to be a leader in STEM developments, losing ground to other nations. According to Plucker et al. (2015), "If we fail to reduce the barriers to excellence for the talent development of our brightest students, our economic preeminence will be fundamentally jeopardized" (p. 20).

Social Justice for Low-Income and Minority Students

Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2010) said, “The battle for a quality education is about so much more than education. It is a daily fight for social justice” (para. 53). For high-achieving, low-income students, the lack of educational opportunities through their school districts can have myriad long-term effects, putting them further behind their upper class peers, which is an unjust situation. Low-income and minority students are underrepresented in gifted programs due to a reliance on teacher nominations for such programs and the lack of universal screenings, according to Card and Giuliano (2015). This means, even if poor or minority high-achieving students attend a school with special services for highly able students, they are less likely to have a chance to participate. Families with more disposable income are more likely to seek out additional educational challenges for their children, on top of their regular schooling, in the form of afterschool and summer enrichment programs, and they are more likely to change schools if a district is not meeting their children’s needs (Plucker et al., 2015). Unfortunately, low-income students do not have these opportunities, and thus, as Petrilli et al. (2016) stated, “They are also the kids most dependent on the education system to recognize and draw out their potential” (p. 5). Teachers recognize this problem, as well, according to Farkas and Duffett (2008). Their survey found that 76% of teachers in low-income schools feel high-ability students from impoverished backgrounds “fall through the cracks because no one advocates for them” (p. 60).

According to Loveless (2008), students who are black, Hispanic, and living in poverty—as defined by qualification for free/reduced lunches—are more likely to attend schools that do not offer advanced mathematics tracks for highly-able students, meaning

they are less likely to have the chance to take algebra before entering high school. Loveless (2008) noted that 26% of high-achieving eighth-grade students in these subgroups are not enrolled in algebra, compared to 18% of the high-achieving students as a whole. Studies have found that high-ability students who take algebra in eighth grade are more likely to take more math courses in high school, are more likely to attend college, and show higher mathematics achievement on standardized tests (Spielhagen, 2006; Stein et al., 2011). Stein et al. (2011) stated, “Historically, algebra has served as a gatekeeper to advanced mathematics and science course taking and entry into high-paying, technical careers” (p. 483). These implications affect high-achieving, low-income students during their school years and far beyond.

As low-income students start elementary school and continue through high school, the discrepancy in achievement between them and their upper class peers increases, creating an “excellence gap” (Plucker et al., 2015, p. 3). Thus, identifying high-achieving students during the elementary years and providing access to appropriate curriculums and instruction is a social justice issue with regard to low-income and minority students. While some state and national legislation require schools to track the progress of these subgroups with regards to reaching proficiency, there no such legislation tracking their progress toward advanced levels. Plucker et al. (2015) found that “no state has a comprehensive system for tracking high-performing, low income students” (p. 16). Without intentional monitoring, this group may continue to be even more overlooked than their wealthier, non-minority peers.

Implications of Putting High Achievers on the Sidelines

When the academic needs of high-achieving students are not being met, they are faced with disengagement. These students may be routinely bored in class (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003), partially caused by the amount of waiting they have to do as they wait for new instruction or activities (Peine & Coleman, 2010; Thorkildsen, 1993). In the most extreme cases, disengagement can cause students to drop out of school (Hansen & Toso, 2007; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). Even if they do not drop out, the lack of advanced academic opportunities can impact these students' career choices, and ultimately, have a negative effect on the nation's economy (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Plucker et al., 2015). Finally, high achieving low-income and minority students are most dependent on the public school system to meet their academic needs, and yet, their schools are the least likely to do so (Card & Giuliano, 2015; Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015). For students in these most fragile conditions, the lack of educational opportunities is a social justice issue that contributes to the excellence gap (Plucker et al., 2015).

Summary of Related Literature

The term *gifted* is a broad expression to describe high-ability students, as measured by intelligence, academic achievement, creativity, reasoning, and problem solving (Burney, 2008; DESE, 2017b; NAGC, 2010; Reis, 2004). While many schools across the state of Missouri offer gifted programs, even more do not; furthermore, even when highly able students are in gifted programs, much of their instruction still takes place in the regular classroom (Archambault et al., 1993; DESE, 2017b, 2017). Additionally, gifted programs are limited to serving a very small slice of a school

population (usually less than 5% of students), meaning there are many highly capable students who are not enrolled in such programs. Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) make the distinction between readiness and ability. Some gifted students are highly able, and yet they underachieve, while other students who are not identified as gifted show great promise in academic performance and on standardized tests (scoring in the top tenth percentile on international and national tests or in advanced levels on state tests). These students can be called “high achievers,” and they are noted to have personal characteristics related to motivation and goal setting, in addition to their intelligence (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). In order for high-achieving students to meet their full learning potential, school districts should consider their learning needs.

Instead of following a factory model for education in which students move along at the same rate as their same-age peers, researchers have proposed differentiated instruction to better meet students’ individual needs. Tomlinson (2005) identified three crucial areas for creating high quality curriculum and instruction: (a) appropriate pacing, (b) appropriate level of challenge, and (c) inclusion of the students’ passion (engagement). High achievers often learn at a faster pace and could benefit from accelerated instruction, whether it is in their classroom, with similar-level peers, or by advancement to another grade (Colangelo et al., 2004). High achievers need learning challenges that are just beyond their development level, but within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). When faced with such challenges, students feel as though they are learning and feel more motivated to continue (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). Finally, high achievers benefit from instructional opportunities that relate to their passions and interests (Tomlinson, 2005) because this

leads to more enjoyment, engagement, and motivation. Despite the clear need for differentiated instruction, researchers have found teachers and administrators are reluctant to implement it in classrooms due to its impact on instructional planning and classroom management, as well as a lack of support from administrators, teachers, and/or parents (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005).

The notion that high-achieving students' needs are not being met is reflected in the research. Archambault et al. (1993) surveyed teachers and found little to no advancement in curriculum or instruction for advanced learners, and these findings were echoed in Farkas and Duffett's (2008) survey of teachers 15 years later. Twenty years after Archambault et al. (1993) published their findings, Colangelo et al.'s (2013) survey found gifted students reported little differentiation or opportunity for advancement.

The lack of adequate learning opportunities has left high-achieving students languishing, even after federal reforms supposedly placed pressure on schools to increase achievement. The NCLB legislation required schools move students up to proficiency, but it did not include provisions for students who were already proficient, causing schools to focus more on struggling students (Farkas & Duffett, 2008). This is represented by a lack of improvement in the achievement scores of high-achieving students. Loveless (2008) and Watkins and Sheng (2008) demonstrated disappointing results for advanced students on both national and state assessments in the years after NCLB.

The ESSA legislation in 2015 was an attempt to improve upon NCLB; however, it also failed to adequately address high-achieving students. With a lack of legislative mission on the federal level, state educational policies have the best chance for monitoring and improving education for these students. Unfortunately, Petrilli et al.

(2016) and Plucker et al. (2015) have found state accountability measures to be lacking in their support for high-achieving students, with few states requiring districts to measure student growth or push students to advanced levels on assessment measures.

With a lack of instructional differentiation from teachers, a lack of improvement on assessment data, and a lack of support for high-achieving students in federal and state accountability measures, it becomes clear that these students' needs are not being met in many classrooms and districts across the nation. This can have dire effects, starting with a disengagement from the educational process (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hansen & Toso, 2007; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Peine & Coleman, 2010; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). The lack of engagement and the lack of advancement opportunities can also impact students' career options and our nation's economy, especially when it comes to STEM fields (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Plucket et al., 2015). While these problems are demonstrated for high-achieving students across the board, the effects for those who are minorities and living in poverty may be even direr. These students are more dependent on their local schools to identify and meet their needs (Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015). From a lack of access to algebra, lack of identification for gifted programs, and a lack of achievement on standardized assessments, many factors demonstrate their needs are not being met, which can put them even further behind their wealthier, non-minority peers (Plucker et al., 2015), despite their advanced potential.

While the existing body of research helps to identify high-achieving students and describe their educational needs, the research also shows that these needs are not being met in today's classrooms, a problem that has plagued the educational system for decades. Continuing to follow this status quo can have a detrimental impact on high

achievers. The existing research does not include interviews with high-achieving elementary students, creating a gap in the literature. Filling this gap with a phenomenological study of high-achieving students and their lived experiences can contribute their voices to the body of research and impact educational practices by allowing teachers to hear these students' voices. Without a change, the educational system will continue to have high achievers sitting on the sidelines.

Section 4:

Contribution to Practice

To be presented to:

The Powerful Learning Conference

Missouri, 2019

Scholars on the Sidelines:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGH-ACHIEVING
ELEMENTARY STUDENTS IN SOUTHWEST MISSOURI

Presented by Kerri R. Cox

Background Information

“Why is there this assumption that the most important thing kids have in common is how old they are? It's like the most important thing about them is their date of manufacture.”

(Sir Ken Robinson, 2010)

What is the definition of “high-achieving student?”

- ◆ Not the same as “gifted”
- ◆ Difference between academic readiness and intellectual ability
- ◆ Defined as students who scored in advanced categories or in the top tenth percentile on standardized assessments
- ◆ For this study: “Students who predominately earned As (or in the top category on a standards-based grading system) and who scored in advanced categories on statewide standardized assessments”

(Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016; Sousa and Tomlinson, 2011)

78%

of teachers claim the needs of high-achieving students take a backseat to the needs of low-achieving students.

73%

of teachers recognize high-achieving students are “bored and under-challenged ...[and] not given a sufficient chance to thrive”

(Farkas & Duffett, 2008)

Statement of the Problem

High-achieving students demonstrate academic prowess, and yet...

- ✗ Most of their instruction takes place in the regular classroom
- ✗ They do not receive any modified instruction in most classrooms
- ✗ They experience a lot of waiting and boredom
- ✗ This can lead to a disengagement from the education process and can affect future job opportunities
- ✗ For poor and minority students, this is a social justice issue

(Archambault, Brown, Hallmark, Emmons, and Zhang, 1993; Assouline, Colangelo, Heo, and Dockery, 2013; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Frakas & Duffett, 2014; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Loveless, 2008; Peine & Coleman, 2010; Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015; Thorkildsen, 1993; Vilorio, 2014)

How Did we Get Here?

- Complex social problem with many influences
- Tug of war for local, state, and federal power
- Increased focus on standardized testing after *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 and No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001
- State accountability measures have **focused more on student proficiency than on student growth**, meaning attention shifted to helping “bubble students” rise up to meet minimum proficiency levels instead of ensuring all students demonstrate growth

(Anderson, 2007; Petrilli et al., 2016; Shelly, 2011)

Conceptual Framework

**Dr. Carol Anne Tomlinson –
teacher, researcher, author**

*Quality Curriculum and
Instruction for Highly Able
Students* (2005)

recommended that instruction
for high achievers be modified in
these three areas:

APPROPRIATE
PACING

DEGREE OF
CHALLENGE

PURSUIT OF
PASSION

Research Design

Research Questions

How would high-achieving elementary students, their parents, and their classroom teachers describe the academic experiences of high-achieving elementary students in suburban schools in southwest Missouri?

- In which ways, if any, do high-achieving students receive **differentiated instruction**, with regard to the degree of challenge, appropriate pacing, and pursuit of passion in learning?
- In which ways, if any, do academic experiences and classroom structures **hinder** high-achieving students?
- In which ways, if any, do academic experiences and classroom structures **support** high-achieving students?

Research Design: Setting/Participants

SETTING

Three elementary schools in Southwest Missouri

Meant to represent typical schools

Some variation in size and poverty levels

PARTICIPANTS

Purposeful sampling of 4th-5th grade students, their parents, and their teachers/counselors

19 students

23 parents

4 teachers

Attended separate focus groups at 3 sites.
4 additional participants completed digital surveys.

Sample Questions

If you had a magic wand and could make your school fit your learning needs and style, what changes would you make?

In general, how would you describe the high-achieving students you have encountered?

In general, would you say our educational system does enough to meet the needs of high-achieving students?

If you were to think of your very favorite learning experience, what was that like?

Research Findings & Recommendations

Status of Differentiated Learning

- **High-achieving students have limited opportunities for differentiated instruction.**

“We don’t get special stuff” (student)

“It’s just repeat material. Repeat, repeat, repeat” (student)

Sometimes, I “zone out” (student)

“My legs, it makes me want to move them” (student)

“Sometimes I feel like I’ve been waiting the whole day and it’s only been a few minutes” (student)

Boring!

Annoying!

Frustrating!

Status of Differentiated Learning

- **Students engage in various activities to fill the down time.**

"You're not allowed to" work ahead (parent)
Reading, writing, doodling, & gaming (students)
"They have more time to get in trouble" (parent)
When students tutor others, "it's like teamwork" (parent)

- **Teachers do provide some differentiated activities.**

"Must Do/May Do" (student)
Learning menus (teacher)
Personalized goals (teacher, student)
Flexible Ability Grouping (teacher, student)
"They don't work ahead, I feel they work deeper" (teacher)

High Achievers are Hindered by:

- **Being placed in mixed-ability classrooms.**

"You have all three dynamics, and they're all in the same class" (parent)
"Our time does not get spent on high achievers because they are so self motivated and can do so much on their own and be successful at it" (teacher)
"They are not the squeaky wheels" (teacher)

- **The increased focus on standardization.**

"Paint-by-number" teaching (parent)
"Why don't you let the teachers get back to being teachers?
There's an art to it" (parent)
"Let the teachers teach!" (parent)

High Achievers are Hindered by:

- **Teachers who teach to the middle (the average level of the learners in his/her classroom).**

“If it’s easy for me, I don’t feel like I’m doing my best” (student)

“Don’t hold them back. Let them go as far as they can” (parent)

“We’re all going to be mediocre” (parent)

“Kids are going to rise to the level of expectation. When you don’t expect anything, they are going to give you that” (parent)

- **Personality conflicts with teachers**

“They don’t see him for what he is, as a curious child” (parent)

He doesn’t “fit into the box” (parent)

High Achievers are Supported by:

- **Connecting learning to their passions**

Libraries & extracurricular activities (students)

“Every child is outstanding at something” (parent)

Car conversations (parent)

“Nurturing self motivation” (parent)

- **Supportive teachers who understand their needs**

“There’s more to it than teaching them the concepts” (parent)

“They’re noticing...they’re actually paying close attention” (parent)

High Achievers are Supported by:

■ Confronting and conquering challenges

“You can see the worry in their eyes” (teacher)

“A mixture of anxiety, enthusiasm, and nervousness” (student)

“Come on, you can do this. You know how to do this” (parent)

“As soon as you learn how to do it, it’s fun” (student)

“I could do this all day!” (student)

Recommendations for Practice

Teachers can improve the learning experience for high-achieving students by asking themselves:

1. Are my high achievers spending significant portions of their school days waiting on the class to progress?
2. Are my high achievers provided consistent opportunities to confront and conquer academic challenges?
3. Do I offer opportunities for my high-achieving students to connect coursework to their passions?
4. If I were a high achiever, would I feel inspired by my class?

Recommendations for Practice

Teachers can improve engagement for high achievers by providing differentiated learning options such as:

Learning Menus	Must Do/ May Do Activities	Passion Projects (Genius Hour)
Independent Learning Goals	Enrichment Activities	Flexible Ability Groups

The following page shows the
handout I will provide practitioners
to accompany this section of the presentation.

Supporting High-Achieving Elementary Students

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Are my high achievers spending significant portions of their school days waiting on the class to progress?
2. Are my high achievers provided consistent opportunities to confront and conquer academic challenges?
3. Do I offer opportunities for my high-achieving students to connect coursework to their passions?
4. If I were a high achiever, would I feel inspired by my class?

Recommendations for Differentiating Learning

Item	Description	Example
Learning Menu	Students are provided a menu of various options for demonstrating their learning. Options can be worth varied weights/points.	For a geography unit, students must complete 100 points worth of activities. They could make a slide show of terms & definitions, build a 3D model, create a video, etc.
Must Do/ May Do	Students are provided a list of activities they must do. Then, they have a list of activities they may do when their initial work is done.	All students must read a chapter, do certain math problems, and complete a social studies activity. Once these items are complete, they have a list of engaging activities to extend their learning, such as practicing terms using an app, designing a book cover, or completing a fun math challenge sheet.
Passion Projects Genius Hour 20% Time	The teacher sets aside a specific time each week for all students to work on a project of their choice. This is modeled after Google's concept of 20% time.	One student could be doing fashion design drawings, another could be planning a fundraising project for an animal shelter, and another could be learning coding online.
Independent Learning Goals	The teacher sets individual learning goals for each student to meet over the course of a unit or semester. Students could work on these in their spare time.	Students are challenged to read a certain number of books, or students are challenged to pass online math quizzes on their independent levels.
Enrichment Activities	The teacher plans enrichment activities for the unit and allows advanced students to do the enrichment instead of the same work as the rest of the class or allows them to do enrichment once their other work is complete.	During a science unit on friction, students can build a car using LEGOs and test its speed. During a math unit on geometry, students can use various shapes to design a house. During a historical fiction unit, students could research the time period and prepare presentations.
Flexible Ability Grouping	The teacher gives a pretest at the beginning of the unit and divides students into different groups based on the results. Learning activities are tailored to the different levels. Advanced students may work independently on deeper concepts, while the teacher works with students requiring more direct teaching.	During a math unit on fractions, the teacher works directly with the students who do poorly on the pretest. Students who pass the pretest move on to changing fractions into decimals and percentages.

Section 5:

Contribution to Scholarship

To be presented to:

Journal of Advanced Academics

Abstract

High-achieving students are those who enter the classroom ready and able to learn. They demonstrate their abilities by earning high grades in their coursework and by receiving high scores on standardized tests. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to articulate the lived experiences of high-achieving elementary students in suburban schools in southwest Missouri. How would high-achieving elementary students, their parents, and their classroom teachers and school counselors describe the academic experiences of high-achieving elementary students in suburban schools in southwest Missouri? Specific research probes looked at the degree to which these students received differentiated instruction and sought to uncover the classroom experiences and academic structures that best support and most hinder these students' growth. The findings show that students have limited differentiated opportunities. In speaking to parents, students, and teachers, the following classroom structures and academic structures emerged as those that most hinder learning: (a) mixed-ability classrooms, (b) a focus on standardization, (c) teaching to the middle, and (d) personality clashes with teachers. The following classroom structures and experiences emerged from the data as those that support high-achieving students: (a) pursuing their passions in and out of the classroom; (b) supportive teachers; and (c) confronting and conquering academic challenges. Implications from this study could provide researchers, educators, and administrators more insight into the needs of high-achievers and recommendations for supporting these students in the classroom.

Keywords

High-achieving students, High-ability students, Gifted learners, Differentiated instruction

Introduction

As studies and news reports take critical looks at the United States' public education system, there is often a rallying cry for the children who are not achieving academically. Students who have fallen behind their grade level need additional instructional support, and schools have been making progress in meeting their needs (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Loveless, 2008). On the other end of the spectrum lie the advanced students, those who have already mastered the skills and learned the content deemed appropriate for their grade level. Surprisingly, these students have academic needs that are not being met (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Loveless, 2008; Petrilli, Griffith, Wright, & Kim, 2016; Plucker, Giancola, Healey, Arndt, & Wang, 2015).

From the nation's earliest days of one-room schoolhouses, educators have been challenged to meet the needs of students on multiple academic levels within a single classroom. As the educational system grew and advanced, students were sorted into grade levels based on their ages; however, this still did not resolve the problem since grade levels were based on age instead of academic readiness. Through the 1950s and beyond, many schools attempted to use tracking programs to sort students into groups within their grade levels based on their abilities, but these programs mostly fell to the wayside as their effectiveness was questioned and issues of fairness and equity were raised (Tieso, 2003). Since then, schools have continued to sort students into grade levels, with a wide-range of abilities represented in a single classroom.

In the last 15 years, two major pieces of federal legislation were passed in hopes of providing major educational reform: the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 (Jacob, 2017). NCLB focused on moving underachieving students up to proficiency on standardized assessments; however, the legislation did not include provisions focusing on high-achieving students (those already scoring in proficient and advanced levels). In the years after NCLB, researchers found a lack of advancement for high achievers, even as state and national assessment scores improved for other students (Loveless, 2008; Watkins & Sheng, 2008). Furthermore, teachers recognized that this legislation forced them to focus more on their remedial students than their advanced students. Farkas and Duffett (2008) conducted a national survey of teachers and reported that 78% agreed with this statement: “Getting underachieving students to reach ‘proficiency’ has become so important that the needs of advanced students take a back seat” (p. 61).

In 2015, ESSA offered a change at the federal level from NCLB by including provisions that measured student growth on standardized assessments, rather than purely focusing on moving students up to proficiency. After this, many states revised their accountability measures; however, researchers have found that few states do an adequate job of encouraging schools to meet the needs of high achievers (Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015). Therefore, this population continues to be overlooked by states, by schools, and by teachers. In the foreword to *High Stakes for High Achievers: State Accountability in the Age of ESSA*, Chester E. Finn, Jr., stated, “The policy challenge going forward is to devise accountability systems that deal with the ceiling as well as the floor. This is partly about fairness. It is wrong for any child to miss out on academic

challenges at school, and we should do everything we can to develop the full potential of all our students, including high achievers” (Petrilli et al., 2016, p. 5).

Literature Review

What is meant by the term *high achiever*, and what characteristics do these students share? A review of the existing literature helped to define and describe this population. Some have proposed that high-achieving students would benefit from differentiated instruction, a concept that will be further explained in this review of literature. Next, this review will explore the existing studies describing how schools are responding to the needs of high-achieving students and the dangers of inadequately responding.

Defining High-Achieving Students

Delineating gifted or high-achieving students has traditionally been a difficult task because no single definition is utilized by school districts, researchers, state education departments, or policy makers (Burney, 2008; Reis, 2004). However, students are given these labels, based on various characteristics. Not all gifted students are high achievers and not all high achievers are gifted; therefore, it is useful to differentiate between the two when discussing their academic needs.

The term *gifted* is a broad expression to describe high-ability students, as measured by intelligence, academic achievement, creativity, reasoning, and problem solving (Burney, 2008; DESE, 2017b; NAGC, 2010; Reis, 2004). While many schools offer gifted programs, many do not; furthermore, even when highly able students are in gifted programs, much of their instruction still takes place in the regular classroom (Archambault et al., 1993; DESE, 2017b, 2017). Additionally, gifted programs are

limited to serving a very small slice of a school population (usually less than 5% of students); thus, many highly capable students are not enrolled in such programs. Also, Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) make the distinction between readiness and ability. Some gifted students are highly able, and yet they underachieve, while other students who are not identified as gifted show great promise in academic performance and on standardized tests (scoring in the top tenth percentile on international and national tests or in advanced levels on state tests). These students can be called *high achievers*, and they are noted to have personal characteristics related to motivation and goal setting, in addition to their intelligence (McCoach & Siegle, 2003).

Differentiating Instruction

Instead of following a factory model for education in which students move along at the same rate as their same-age peers, researchers have proposed differentiated instruction to better meet students' individual needs. Tomlinson (2005) identified three crucial areas for creating high quality curriculum and instruction: (a) appropriate pacing, (b) appropriate level of challenge, and (c) inclusion of the students' passion. High achievers often learn at a faster pace and could benefit from accelerated instruction, whether it is in their classroom, with similar-level peers, or by advancement to another grade (Colangelo et al., 2004). High achievers need learning challenges that are just beyond their development level, but within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). When faced with such challenges, students feel as though they are learning and feel more motivated to continue (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). Finally, high achievers benefit from instructional opportunities that relate to their passions and interests (Tomlinson, 2005) because this leads to more

enjoyment, engagement, and motivation. Despite the clear need for differentiated instruction, researchers have found teachers and administrators are reluctant to implement it in classrooms due to its impact on instructional planning and classroom management, as well as a lack of support from administrators, teachers, and/or parents (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005).

How Schools Respond to the Needs of High-Achieving Students

Research has demonstrated that high-achieving students' academic needs are not being met by the United States' public educational system. Archambault et al. (1993) surveyed teachers and found little to no advancement in curriculum or instruction for advanced learners, and these findings were echoed in Farkas and Duffett's (2008) survey of teachers 15 years later. Twenty years after Archambault et al. (1993) published their findings, Colangelo et al.'s (2013) survey found gifted students reported little differentiation or opportunity for advancement.

Inadequate learning opportunities have left high-achieving students languishing, even after federal reforms placed pressure on schools to increase achievement. The NCLB legislation required schools move students up to proficiency, but it did not include provisions for students who were already proficient, causing schools to focus more on struggling students (Farkas & Duffett, 2008). This is represented by a lack of improvement in the achievement scores of high-achieving students. Loveless (2008) and Watkins and Sheng (2008) demonstrated disappointing results for advanced students on both national and state assessments in the years after NCLB.

The ESSA legislation in 2015 was an attempt to improve upon NCLB; however, it also failed to adequately address high-achieving students. With a lack of legislative

mission on the federal level, state educational policies have the best chance for monitoring and improving education for these students. Unfortunately, Petrilli et al. (2016) and Plucker et al. (2015) have found state accountability measures to be lacking in their support for high-achieving students, with few states requiring districts to measure student growth or push students to advanced levels on assessment measures.

Dangers of Inadequately Meeting the Needs of High-Achieving Students

With a lack of instructional differentiation from teachers, a lack of improvement on assessment data, and a lack of support for high-achieving students in federal and state accountability measures, it becomes clear that these students' needs are not being met in many classrooms and districts across the United States. This can have dire effects, starting with a disengagement from the educational process (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hansen & Toso, 2007; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Peine & Coleman, 2010; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). The lack of engagement and the lack of advancement opportunities can also impact students' career options and the nation's economy, especially when it comes to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Plucket et al., 2015). While these problems are demonstrated for high-achieving students across the board, the effects for minority students and those living in poverty may be even more dire. These students are more dependent on their local schools to identify and meet their needs (Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015). From a lack of access to algebra, lack of identification for gifted programs, and a lack of achievement on standardized assessments, many factors demonstrate the students' needs are not being met, which can put such students even further behind their wealthier, non-minority peers (Plucker et al., 2015), despite their advanced potential.

Research Design and Analysis

The review of literature demonstrates that high-achieving students have advanced academic needs; however, state accountability measures and public education practices do not adequately address these students' needs. The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of high-achieving elementary students in order to contribute to the body of scholarly literature and to impact current instructional practices. The following research question guided this study: How would high-achieving elementary students, their parents, and their classroom teachers and school counselors describe the academic experiences of high-achieving elementary students in suburban schools in southwest Missouri? Specifically, the study explored the ways in which high-achieving students receive differentiated instruction, with regard to the degree of challenge, appropriate pacing, and pursuit of students' passions. Finally, the study sought to describe the academic experiences and classroom structures that best support and those that most hinder high-achieving students.

In his description of the phenomenological research movement, Spiegelberg (1971) said researchers should "turn to the things themselves" by "turning toward phenomena which had been blocked from sight by the theoretical patterns in front of them" (p. 681). This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design in order to explore and describe the lived experiences of high-achieving elementary students by going to the students themselves to ask about these experiences, with parents and teachers providing additional insights.

Setting

The setting for this study included three elementary schools in southwest Missouri. While many middle schools and high schools offer opportunities for advanced learners to benefit from advanced courses, most elementary schools have not developed systematic protocols or methods for working with advanced students. Therefore, the researchers opted to limit this study to elementary schools in order to focus on the early academic experiences of high-achieving students.

When selecting the three public elementary schools for this study, an attempt was made to select sites that offered some variance in these factors: (a) socioeconomic status of students and (b) population size of the building. This variation helped ensure that the phenomenon in question is not relegated to a single type of school. While these sites do not fully represent the range of variations within Missouri public schools, they capture the essence of what could be considered a typical school.

Participants

When selecting participants, researchers should find those who “will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2014, p. 189). While very young students may be high achieving, they may not be able to adequately articulate these experiences; therefore, the researchers focused on upper elementary students in fourth and fifth grades. Potential participants were identified as *high achieving* based on their on academic achievement (predominately earning A’s as letter grades or the equivalent on a standards-based grading system) and standardized test scores (scoring in *advanced* categories on the Missouri Assessment Program tests). This criteria was developed based on the work of Loveless (2008) and Petrilli et al. (2016),

which defined high achievers as those who scored in advanced categories or in the top tenth percentile on standardized assessments. Furthermore, Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) described the difference between academic readiness and ability, which led to the inclusion of students' academic grades as part of the definition of *high-achieving student* for this study.

The researchers used a purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of students from participating school settings based on school counselor recommendations. School counselors used the criteria stated above to identify high-achieving students. In order to increase the transferability of findings from a qualitative study, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended the use of maximum variation to allow for "the possibility of a greater range of application" (p. 257). Therefore, care was made to invite participants from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Once potential student participants were identified, the counselor contacted the students' parents to share materials related to the research design and informed consent, as well as an invitation to participate in the focus groups. Separate focus groups were held for students and for parents. Similarly, an email was sent out to 4th and 5th grade teachers at the participating sites, offering details about informed consent and inviting them to participate in teacher focus groups. Parents, students, and teachers were also offered an alternative opportunity to complete a digital survey if they were unable or unwilling to participate in the focus groups.

Approximately 15-40 students (and their respective parents), as well as 4-10 teachers, were queried per site and invited to participate in the study. Three sets of focus groups were held at each of the three sites (one for students, one for parents, and one for

teachers). Collectively, 19 students, 23 parents, and four teachers participated in the focus groups. Additionally, one student, one parent, and two teachers completed the digital surveys.

Data Collection Tools

Data was collected utilizing several qualitative methods, primarily phenomenological focus groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). These focus groups included “unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from participants” (Creswell, 2014, p. 190). Each semi-structured interview or focus group meeting lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes, allowing sufficient time for discussion without demanding too much time from the participants.

Focus group participants were asked questions relating to academic experiences and classroom structures, specifically focusing on pacing, challenge, and pursuits of passions (which were identified by Tomlinson, 2005, as important elements of differentiation for highly able students). This led to an understanding of which elements support and which elements hinder high-achieving students. Questions were developed utilizing the recommendations of Creswell (2014), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Seidman (2013), and separate focus group protocols were developed for students, for parents, and for teachers. Furthermore, interview questions were aligned with ethical considerations.

Additionally, a qualitative survey tool was developed for each group of participants (students, parents, and teachers/counselors), and these surveys included open-ended questions similar to those used in the focus groups. The waiver of informed

consent and the survey instrument were distributed electronically to parents (with a separate survey and consent materials for students) and teachers who were not willing or able to participate in the focus groups. This instrument provided data from additional participants, which was used to triangulate the data from the focus groups.

Data Analysis

Appropriate data analysis techniques were utilized in order to formulate themes relating to the research questions. First, all of the data was examined, treating all pieces as equally important, as part of the horizontalization process described by Merriam & Tisdell (2016). This helped establish the researchers' trustworthiness, as it ensured the researcher did not pick and choose data that reflects a preconceived hypothesis he or she wanted to prove. Next, all of the data was reviewed in order begin to "construct categories or themes that capture recurring patterns that cut across the data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 207). Once a handful of categories were identified, all pieces of data were then coded and sorted to denote their relations to these themes (Creswell, 2014). Since this was a phenomenological study, close attention was paid to data that helped to understand how people experience the phenomena identified in the research questions. Continued phenomenological reduction allowed the researcher to focus on the participants' descriptions of their experiences "in order to get at its essence" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 227).

Findings

The following research question guided this study: How would high-achieving elementary students, their parents, and their classroom teachers and school counselors describe the academic experiences of high-achieving elementary students in suburban

schools in southwest Missouri? Through a series of focus groups and qualitative surveys, data was gathered to help describe the lived experiences of these students by first describing the status of differentiated instruction. During the data analysis, several themes emerged relating to the academic experiences and classroom structures that hinder high achievers and those that best support high achievers.

Status of Differentiated Instruction

The first sub-question guiding this research study was the following: In which ways, if any, do high-achieving students receive differentiated instruction, with regard to the degree of challenge, appropriate pacing, and pursuit of students' passions? The data showed that differentiation is rarely offered and that high-achieving students have ample amounts of down time to fill during the school day. Students have various strategies for staying occupied during this down time, and most expressed feeling frustrated and bored due to the lack of challenge. However, several students cited examples of differentiated opportunities within and beyond their classroom.

No “special stuff”: Limited differentiation for high achievers. Parents, students, and teachers from three school districts were unanimous in agreeing that differentiated instruction is rarely offered for high-achieving elementary students. One student said, “Basically, I am just with everyone else.” Another said, “We don’t get special stuff, no one does.” Another agreed, “We don’t get a choice. My teacher goes on to the next unit, and we just learn what’s there.” Parents have recognized this as well. One parent said his son often asked to be homeschooled because “he wants to go as far and as fast as he can,” and another stated, “They want it to be faster because they’re ready to learn something new.” Teachers agree that they do not do enough to

differentiate instruction for high achievers. One said, “We have to meet the needs of all the learners, and so our time does not get spent on high achievers because they are so self motivated and can do so much on their own and be successful at it.” One teacher commented that she didn’t offer more differentiation because she was worried about segregating students by ability, which has been discouraged in recent years.

This lack of differentiation shows up in the pacing of instruction, which is too slow for many of the high achievers, and the lack of challenge for students who are readily able to move on to more complex learning. Many students commented that they find school boring much of the time, with several using words like “annoying” and “frustrating” to describe their experiences. One student said, “It doesn’t really change, nothing happens. It’s just repeat material. Repeat, repeat, repeat, and then something new. Then you repeat that for two or three weeks.” Another said, “Sometimes I feel like I’ve been waiting the whole day and it’s only been a few minutes.” When asked to describe the feelings they have while waiting in class, one boy stated, “My legs, it makes me want to move them,” and other students physically demonstrated how constrained they feel. However, a few students made it clear they were not bothered by the extra free time, saying they use it to relax and to “zone out.” A teacher noted that some students “seem happy to have that time.”

Working on “something else”: How high-achieving students fill their down time. When the pacing of instruction is too slow, students feel tempted to work ahead; however, they recognize teachers do not encourage this practice. Several students directly stated that they are reprimanded for working ahead. One mother said her son has been told by his teacher, “You’re not allowed to do that.” She continued, “And [my son]

is not a rule breaker.” Students recognized that their teachers might have reasons for not letting them move ahead independently. One stated, “My teacher doesn’t really like us working ahead because he likes to explain stuff,” while another said her teacher told her, “You don’t want to fill your head with what you don’t need to know.” Parents, on the other hand, did not understand why students were not allowed to work ahead, a practice one parent called “ridiculous.”

While waiting on their classmates, high achievers fill their time with a host of activities. One teacher saw this as a good characteristic, stating, “They are able to go to something else without even direction.” Several students noted that they work ahead, even though that is discouraged. One student said, “I’ll just kinda peek at the next question.” Some work on homework from other classes. Many students noted that they liked to read, write, or draw in their free time. A parent was glad her student enjoyed writing stories during her down time, stating, “As long as she’s able to do something else while other people are catching up, I guess she’s okay.” Most importantly, teachers approve of these kinds of quiet activities because they keep the high achievers occupied.

For parents and for students, getting in trouble during the students’ down time was occasionally a concern. One student worried about digging in her desk, while another knew talking would get her in trouble. One parents recognized that her son is a “comedian and an entertainer,” so she suspected he would draw too much attention to himself during his free time. One parent summed it up with, “They have more time to get in trouble.” For students who are not able to self direct during their spare time, it clearly becomes a problem.

In order to occupy students' time and to benefit struggling students, teachers sometimes ask high achievers to assist their classmates with their work. Some parents noted, however, that students occasionally got in trouble for helping. Other parents saw the benefits of peer tutoring, with one stating, "My kid is sometimes a teacher." Another parent added, "It's easier to learn from another kid." One parent noted that this encouraged good character in the students. He said, "I love that they're being taught that if they're done, you don't always have to think about yours and mine...it's like teamwork." Some high achieving students agreed with these assessments and clearly enjoyed helping their classmates. However, one parent noted that his son did not enjoy spending his time that way and would rather not be put in that position.

"It's tailored" to you: Differentiated opportunities provided by teachers.

While not widespread, high achievers do experience various kinds of differentiated instruction in their classrooms. Some teachers primarily offer differentiation in the types of activities students can do in their down time, after they have finished their main work. For example, teachers may allow students to play educational games on computers or iPads in the classroom. Students noted that they like websites, apps, and games like Prodigy, Sumdog, and IXL because these programs expand their learning by challenging them at progressive levels and by moving at their own pace. One student said, "It's tailored to what level you're on and what you want to learn." Other students described feeling bad about playing games as other students finished their work, while others described themselves rushing through their own work to get to the games. While students enjoyed the gaming opportunities, they also recognized that they led to problems.

Some teachers provided more structured choice activities for students' down time. A student described a classroom practice called "Must Do/May Do." In this classroom, students have a variety of activities lined out as items they must complete, with an additional list of supplemental items that students may do, if time allows. A student noted that she really liked this because she had "unlimited stuff to do." At the same school, another student spoke of having independent goals to work on during her free time. She described different challenges in reading and math, where learning levels were more individualized and students worked at their own pace, sometimes over the course of a semester or year. This student said, "I like having goals in science, math, reading, writing. I like it having something to keep on my mind like, 'Try to get this number.'" A teacher from that district also described a math challenge board she created, which allowed students to choose their own methods for demonstrating their learning. She said the high achievers responded positively to this, with some doing "twice as much as they were required to do." One student said she liked opportunities like this, stating, "I like it whenever our teacher gives us the space to learn it ourselves and explain it in our own ways."

Some teachers provide more substantive differentiated instruction by using limited forms of ability grouping. In these situations, the teacher gives a formative assessment to determine how well students understand certain skills and concepts. This information can then be used to group students for differentiated instruction or assignments. One teacher said she pulled select math groups based on student abilities. A student noted, "We do this quiz in class every day for math, and then it depends on which homework you get, like enrichment, teaching, or practice." Two other students

similarly used the terms “enrichment” and “practice” to describe differentiated math activities. At a different school, students noticed a similar practice in reading instruction. She stated, “In reading, we will take a quiz, and that’s how she [the teacher] will divide our reading groups. She gets an average of people who were all really close together and then puts them in a group.” A teacher in that district also spoke of the use of reading groups, stating, “They [high achievers] have the same assignment, the same expectations, but with a harder text, and it involves more comprehension and a deeper level.” She described that these students were more analytical in their reading, while another teacher noticed that they make deeper connections to the texts. Another agreed, stating, “They don’t work ahead, I feel more they work deeper.” Several parents perceived it as being easier for teachers to provide differentiation in reading because of the availability of advanced texts.

Practices that Hinder High Achievers

The second sub-question guiding this research study was the following: In which ways, if any, do academic experiences and classroom structures hinder high-achieving students? The data revealed school may be a frustrating, boring experience for high achievers, with few opportunities for advancement and challenge. Participants expressed concern that students were placed in mixed-ability classrooms, where standardized curricula were used, despite the various ability levels of students. Participants noted there was a tendency for teachers to *teach to the middle* (by teaching to the average level of the students in the class) instead of offering challenges for high achievers. In other cases, personality conflicts with teachers hindered high achievers.

High achievers are “not the squeaky wheels”: High achievers in mixed-ability classrooms. As schools have moved toward mixed-ability classrooms and away from ability grouping, high achievers are likely to be placed in classrooms with students sometimes several years behind them academically. Parents described how classroom dynamics affected their students, even though parents were complete outsiders to the classroom. One father stated, “You have such vast dynamics between either a special needs learner or a kid in the middle or a kid that’s a high achiever. You have all three dynamics, and they’re all in the same class. It’s hard to move that whole group as one unit backward and forward.” Others described specific years where their students were in classes with students with difficult behavioral and academic needs. A mother noted, “I notice a hindrance in my kids’ learning abilities when it’s the stuff that the teacher can’t control.” One said, “It’s hard for teachers to teach a large number and a wide variety. I think our teachers do a good job of trying, but it’s just time-consuming and difficult.” Overwhelmingly, the parents did not blame the teachers for these situations; however, they were frustrated when their students’ learning was hindered.

Echoing the parents’ frustrations, teachers also noticed the problems caused by mixed-ability classrooms. Teachers described feeling pushed to focus their efforts on helping struggling learners. One teacher stated, “Instead of us being there to continue to push [the high achievers] even further, our time is spent with the low-achieving students.” One teacher said she purposely does not dig into more challenging content due to the mixed abilities in her classroom. She said, “I think teachers hinder the growth by not going deep enough on a topic because many of the students wouldn’t get it.” Another remarked, “We have to meet the needs of all the learners, and so our time does

not get spent on high achievers because they are so self motivated and can do so much on their own and be successful at it.” Because high achieving students are able to work successfully independently, a teacher noted that their needs get overlooked because “they are not the squeaky wheels.”

Some parents did note advantages to mixed-ability classrooms. These parents did not want their children isolated from others since they will be interacting with a wide range of people throughout their lives. One parent stated, “I don’t really want isolation because when you’re an adult, you’re going to talk to all people, various levels. You’re going to work with some major idiots, too, and you have to know how to be social with everyone.” Other parents echoed this sentiment.

“Paint-by-number teaching”: A focus on standardization. Despite the fact that classrooms are increasingly meeting diverse needs, there appears to be a focus on standardization. One teacher said, “We have a curriculum that we have to stay near,” which was echoed in a parent’s statement, “They don’t have the flexibility to differentiate education. It’s like you have to do this, and you have to do this.” Others described the teacher as “pigeon-holed...not allowed to teach” and wished the curriculum “was more free flowing and not so rigid.” One parent compared teaching to an art. When a teacher is overly constrained, the parent warned, “It’s like paint-by-number. What we’re doing right now is not teaching.” Another parent echoed the art analogy when she stated, “Why don’t you let the teachers get back to being teachers? Because there’s an art to it. You can intuitively do things, but you can’t quantify what they’re doing.” Another summed it up when she stated, “Let the teachers teach!”

“Kids rise to the level of expectation”: Teaching to the middle limits high achievers. When there is too much standardization and not enough differentiation, high achieving students are hindered due to the phenomenon some call *teaching to the middle*. When teachers keep instruction below the level of their high-achieving students, those students are not pushed to reach their learning potential in the ways other students are. Parents seem aware of this problem. A parent in one focus group made a striking statement, “We don’t really have a lot of room for high achievers here.” One father expressed that he wished the schools would challenge high achievers more. He said when a “person that shows achievement and shows that desire and drive, don’t hold them back. Let them go as far as they can.” Another parent noted, “They [the students] want it to be faster because they’re ready to learn something new.” When describing her high-achieving student, a mother gave this description: “Let me get my tasks done, excel, and fly as fast as I can, as hard as I can, get there, and then let me move on to the next thing.” When they are not challenged, kids may develop a blasé attitude. One parent said when her child isn’t being adequately pushed, the student responds, “I’m so over it. I’ve been there, done that, I’m done.”

Even as young as 10 years old, students are aware of the fact that their educational system is not necessarily pushing them to meet their potential. One student said she would like to have more challenging schoolwork. She stated, “I could probably advance...and get better at what I need to get better on.” A student echoed this idea of enjoying the challenge when she stated, “I want [my classes] to be a little harder because if they are already too easy it gets boring. If they were more challenging, it would be

more fun.” Some students internalize the lack of challenge. One girl stated, “If it’s easy for me, I don’t feel like I’m doing my best.”

A parent warned that teaching to the middle level could make everyone move to the middle. Instead of having extremes of black and white, she explained, “We’re all going to be gray, and we’re all going to be mediocre.” Another parent warned, that the educational system is “flawed in a way, and you can’t excel past where you’re supposed to go.” A father noted that his son often gets excited about learning but then “feels like he’s hit a wall of not being able to progress further.” Ultimately, a parent stated, “Kids rise to the level of expectations. When you don’t expect anything, they’re going to give you that.”

When students “don’t fit into the box”: Personality conflicts with teachers.

Within five or six years of schooling, the students participating in this study had already had a wide range of experiences in public school classrooms. Parents remarked again and again that the teacher was the ultimate determining factor for whether or not a student had a good year. One parent noted, “We’ve had a couple of classrooms where the dynamic doesn’t work.” A mother stated, “There are teachers that do not understand and respect a kid’s individual ability. They don’t see him for what he is, as a curious child.” One parent said her child doesn’t “fit into the box.” While some teachers worked very well with him, others did not.

When the dynamic does not work and a child is not properly challenged, it can lead to disagreements between the student and the teacher. Either because of the extra time on their hands or because of their intellectual energy, some high achievers find themselves in trouble with their teachers. One parent said, “Since he’s an atypical

learner, they don't respect him as a person, and they don't know what to do with him. As a result, he ends up constantly in trouble.” Another noted that a teacher acted annoyed with her son for asking too many questions.

Classroom Structures that Support High Achievers

The final sub-question guiding this research study was the following: In which ways, if any, do academic experiences and classroom structures support high-achieving students? Several themes emerged from the data to show how teachers and schools could better support high achieving students. First, students described rich academic interests and passions, and they liked when they could connect schoolwork to those passions. Next, parents and students appreciated supportive teachers who understood the needs of high-achieving students and worked to meet those needs in various ways. Finally, high achievers benefit from having the opportunity to confront and conquer academic challenges.

“Nurturing self motivation”: Connecting learning to students’ passions. The students interviewed for this study had a wide range of passions that they wanted to explore, from baseball to botany. Sometimes, they had the opportunity to pursue those during the school day, but this often was not in the classroom. Several students commented on how much they enjoyed special classes (like art, music, and physical education) because they relate to their talents and passions, and some noted that the school library was a favorite place because they could explore their passions there. One student said, “I finally learned they have astronomy books in the library,” and he described how this allowed him to explore a topic he found fascinating.

Many students found similar enjoyment in school-supported extra-curricular activities. One parent stated that her child's participation in math team helped "fill the gap." Other students described special school events like the art show and open mic nights as favorite learning activities. Parents said these opportunities allow students to "kind of shine" and to "show off their work to everyone." While high achievers might readily find these opportunities, one parent noted, "Every child is outstanding at something. We need to be finding out what those kids are outstanding at."

When students connect coursework with their passions, parents hear about it. One parent stated, "They'll bring it up at dinner or they'll interview us, 'Hey, what do you think about this or what is this? Do you know what this is?' They'll ask us questions. That's kind of neat." One parent described these as "car conversations," meaning students were so excited about their learning, they would bring it up in the car. Families enjoyed hearing the students' enthusiasm, and many saw this as a chance to encourage them to learn at home. One parent said her child enjoyed doing so, "as long as it didn't feel like homework." Parents also saw this as a chance to extend their child's motivation. One stated, "We find ourselves researching things that he's interested in and kind of taking it a step farther [than he does in school] to just keep him interested and keep him moving, kind of hoping to nurture self-motivation." The parent continued, "If he wants to pursue something, he doesn't have to have a teacher. He can say, 'Okay, well, I found this interesting, so I'm going to pull from that and go further on my own.'" Another parent similarly noted, "There comes a point where it's our responsibility to help them move on and not let the teacher be a boundary." While some students have families who

provide these opportunities, others do not; therefore, they are more dependent upon the classroom teacher.

“There’s more to it than teaching the concepts”: Supportive teachers and high achievers. Despite noting some negative experiences, many of the students in the study also found classrooms where teachers made a positive impact. One parent credited her child’s teacher with an extreme academic turnaround. She stated, “I’ve noticed a huge difference this year [with my daughter]. She was taking medicine for ADHD, and now she doesn’t. To me, that tells me the teacher is doing something different, and she’s taught her how to focus and how to use her strengths to achieve at higher levels than she did before. Where before, it seemed she got into more trouble when she would get antsy, and she didn’t get the excellent grades that she does now.”

Parents expressed appreciation for teachers who went out of their way to inspire their children to succeed. One commented, “There’s more to it than teaching them the concepts. It’s the morale and keeping them motivated and in high spirits.” Another described this as “cheerleading.” Other parents could tell the teachers focused on students’ individual learning, and parents appreciated when those teachers engaged in conversations about the child’s needs. One said, “The teacher will actually talk to us about their performance. They’re noticing what’s high achieving in the classroom because they’re actually paying close enough attention to see what’s going on.”

“Anxiety, enthusiasm, and nervousness”: High achievers need to confront and conquer challenges. For many high achievers, encounter new learning challenges is initially an uncomfortable experience. A teachers noted, “You can hear the worry in their voice...you can see the worry in their eyes.” Students confirmed they often are uneasy in

these moments. One student said learning something new is a mixture of “anxiety, enthusiasm, and nervousness.” He continued, “Because if I don’t understand it, I get so confused I feel like just running out of the place and screaming at the top of my lungs.” Another said she gets very overwhelmed and stated, “It’s just crazy because at some point, I just end up questioning my existence.” A parent noted that her child all went into panic mode and would say things like, “I don’t understand this math. I hate this math. I hate this math.” Similarly, a mother said her daughter feels “like she’s not good enough to do it, and the attitude comes out a little bit.”

After the initial reluctance to a new challenge, high achievers demonstrate a number of coping mechanisms to help them overcome their anxiety. One parent said she would find her son chattering to himself, saying, “Come on, you can do this. You know how to do this. You can do this.” A student said he would persevere and would console himself by thinking, “Well, I can work on this more, and then maybe I can get it right after a couple of tries.” A mother commented, “Then all of a sudden, when it makes sense, she’s over it.” Another noted a similar turnaround, “It’s like a few seconds, and then they get it, and then they’re fine.”

Struggling through this time of uncertainty is ultimately a good feeling. One student described the experience in this way, “As soon as you learn how to do it, it’s fun.” A fourth grader provided the example of her experience learning long division. She stated, “At first, I was like, I’m going to hate this, but now I love it.” Another experienced this when her teacher introduced a basic algebra skill. She explained, “Learning something new feels exciting. Like today, my teacher, since she’s a math team teacher, she even had to look it up, it was like x equals this and do this and this, so it was

fun whenever we learned it.” Ultimately, once a new challenge is conquered, many high achievers feel like the student who stated, “I could do this all day!”

Summary of Findings

This study sought to describe the lived experiences of high-achieving elementary students. Interviewing students and their parents and teachers allowed the researchers to gather data about these experiences. Several themes emerged from this data upon analysis (see Figure 1). [Insert Figure 1]

Differentiated instruction for high-achieving elementary students rarely occurs, but there are isolated examples. Students generally are not able to move at their own pace, nor do they receive more challenging content on a widespread basis. They spend a lot of time in class waiting on their classmates, and they fill this time with various activities. Parents, students, and teachers would like to see more differentiation.

Several current academic practices hinder high-achieving students, including mixed-ability classrooms, a focus on standardization, teachers who teach to the middle, and personality clashes between some teachers and high achievers. In general, students are placed into classrooms with classmates on a wide range of levels. Despite this, schools generally take a standardized approach to education, not offering differentiation to high-achieving students. Within these classrooms, teachers teach to the average level of the students, which means high achievers are often frustrated and bored. When the teachers do not understand or accommodate the learning needs of the high achievers, personality clashes can develop.

Despite some experiences that hold high achievers back, keeping them on the sidelines, there are several academic practices that support these learners. High achievers

are excited when they have the chance to pursue their passions, whether it be in the classroom, through their special classes or extracurricular activities, or independently. Teachers are ultimately the ones who decide whether or not students have these kinds of opportunities in the classroom. Students and parents have observed how critical the teacher is to the high-achieving students' classroom experience. A teacher who understands these students and their academic needs will be better able to provide appropriate challenges. However, when facing a new challenge, students are initially skeptical, nervous, and anxious. Once they begin to feel more comfortable, they truly enjoy learning and consider it fun.

Discussion

Coleman et al. (2015) described the experiences of high achievers as “ready child, unprepared school” (p. 366). This summation was perfectly echoed by the parent who stated, “We don’t really have a lot of room for high achievers here.” The data shows that public schools are not doing enough to inspire and challenge the high-achieving students, a sentiment that carries through numerous scholarly studies, as well as the data collected from the parents, students, and teachers who participated this study.

Archambault et al. (1993) and Assouline et al. (2013) substantiated that high achieving students received most of their instruction in their regular classrooms, and few received any major forms of differentiation. The focus group interviews with parents and students showed the same to be true in their experiences. Students described a school day in which a lot of time was spent waiting on new instruction and activities, using words like “annoying” and “bored” to describe their experiences. Parents were aware of their students' feelings and described the same frustration.

Early educational leaders like Horace Mann inspired our nation to sort students into grades by age (Pratt, 1986), which persists to this day. After experimenting with various forms of tracking through the 1900s, schools have returned to mixed-ability classrooms (Tieso, 2003), with teachers struggling to meet the needs of a wide-range of learners. Farkas and Duffett's (2008) surveys of teachers showed that teachers felt compelled to focus more on the needs of struggling learners, even though this meant high achievers' needs were not met. Though only a small handful of teachers participated in the focus groups for this study, they each echoed the findings of Farkas and Duffett.

Through the latter part of the 1900s and early 2000s, there was a strong shift toward federal control of education, inspired by events such as the Space Race and the publication of the critical *A Nation at Risk* (Anderson, 2007; Church & Sedlak, 1976; Shelly, 2011). For better or for worse, this increased the standardization of schooling. Robinson (2010) said education is “essentially about conformity, and increasingly, it is about that if you look at the growth of standardized testing and standardized curricula. I believe we've got to go in the exact opposite direction.” Students clearly noted this was a problem in their classrooms, with one student describing their school day like this: “Sometimes I feel like I’ve been waiting the whole day and its only been a few minutes.” Even though parents do not directly have classroom experience, the parents who participated in this study recognized that standardization was holding back high achievers. One parent asked, “Why don’t you let the teachers get back to being teachers? Because there’s an art to it,” while another compared today’s teaching to “paint-by-number” art. Parents and teachers would like to see teachers given more freedom in the classroom to individualize, personalize, or differentiate instruction. Instead, schools tend

to teach to the middle, which one parent pointed out would lead to everyone being mediocre. Students who do not have the opportunity to learn at a level that is challenging for them become less engaged in the educational process.

Tomlinson (2005) argued, “Curriculum (what students learn) and instruction (how they learn it) should work in tandem to ensure that each student is consistently engaged with high-quality ideas and processes” (p. 161). In order for this to happen for high achievers, there needs to be more differentiation and less standardization. Tomlinson proposed offering a faster pace, more challenging content, and more opportunities to connect learning to individual passions. As Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) stated, “Learning is the opposite of boredom, [and] learning is the antidote to boredom” (p. 2). In this study, students could quite aptly describe how good it feels when they are challenged by the content or when they get to explore their own passions. Students used the word “fun” again and again to describe this feeling, with one even proclaiming, “I could do this all day!” These descriptions echoed the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Learning something new after a period of struggle feels good, but more importantly, it is necessary for the growth of students. In order of high-achieving students to meet their potential, they need to regularly conquer learning challenges.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described what happens when there is a lack of challenge, stating, “One cannot enjoy doing the same thing at the same level for long. We grow either bored or frustrated” (p. 75). High achieving students are telling educators they are bored and frustrated by the status quo in today’s classrooms, and it is up to educators to listen and provide the kind of support they need.

Implications

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to articulate the lived experiences of high-achieving elementary students in suburban schools in southwest Missouri. Currently, there is a gap in the literature regarding high-achieving students, especially with regard to qualitative literature. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that high achievers' academic needs are not being met in the classroom, which is a problem of practice (Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015). This study can contribute to the body of educational research and impact instructional practices.

While some literature exists regarding the academic and emotional needs of gifted students, the experiences of the broader category of high-achieving students have not been explored in as great of depth. Some high-achieving students may be classified gifted, but the two terms are not interchangeable, as some gifted students show high academic achievement while others do not (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Therefore, it was important to gain a specific understanding of the experiences of high-achieving students, as they are a phenomenon in their own right.

This study helped to fill the existing gap in the literature by providing a phenomenological study about the experiences of high-achieving elementary students, adding to the body of quantitative studies focusing on these students and the full body of research regarding gifted students, specifically. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "A phenomenological approach is well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences" (p. 28), and the task of a phenomenologist is "to depict the essence or basic structure of experience" (p. 26). This study can help researchers and practitioners to understand the essence of experience for high achievers.

This qualitative study reflects the existing quantitative studies showing high-achieving students' academic needs are not being thoroughly met; therefore, the students need to have their voices heard. This can be accomplished by publishing journal articles and presenting at teaching conferences, thus sharing the study's findings (and student voices) with researchers and practitioners.

Furthermore, this study can have an impact on educational practices. Since studies have found that high-achieving students' needs are being sidelined (Farkas & Duffett, 2008; Loveless, 2008; Petrilli et al., 2016; Plucker et al., 2015), it is imperative to understand which academic experiences and classroom structures hinder these students' academic development. Furthermore, the study helped to uncover the academic experiences and classroom structures that support high achievers' academic development. By describing how teachers can better meet the needs of high-achieving learners, a set of best practices can be identified and shared with educators and administrators.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, there are several recommendations that can improve classroom practices with regard to high-achieving students. Educators who consider the academic needs of these students will provide more opportunities for differentiation instruction and offer more individualized learning challenges.

This research helps educators move forward with an increased awareness of the needs of high achievers. While teachers may assume these students are doing fine, parents and students expressed otherwise. Students are frustrated and bored, which is unfortunate for students who want to learn. Teachers can ask themselves these questions:

- (1) Are my high achievers spending significant portions of their school days waiting on

the class to progress? (2) Are my high achievers provided consistent opportunities to face and conquer academic challenges? (3) Do I offer opportunities for my high-achieving students to connect coursework to their passions? (4) If I were a high achiever, would I feel inspired by my class? Personally assessing the conditions is the first step in improving them.

To improve the academic experiences for high-achieving students, teachers could offer more opportunities for differentiated instruction. One easy practice to implement is a menu of supplemental activities for students who complete their work early. This study found that many students are left to their own devices during their down time. A few participants described structured activities they could do once their classwork was completed (such as Must Do/May Do). Offering these types of activities extends and enriches students' learning. While digital learning games seem like an obvious choice in classrooms with technology, students expressed mixed feelings about these. Though they personally enjoyed the games, the opportunity to play games puts pressure on students to hurry through their work. Teachers can consider creating a list of enrichment topics related to a current unit, preparing a box of nonfiction books for students to explore, or creating a set of enjoyable math challenges that are different from typical homework.

Finally, teachers could provide more individualized challenges for students. Instead of holding all students to the same standard (which is usually below the learning capacity of high achievers), setting individual goals for students pushes all students to reach their potential. One teacher described the use of math choice boards, and students described individual reading and math challenges. Furthermore, these kinds of activities can also provide space for connections with students' passions by allowing them to

express their learning in diverse ways, connect with authentic audiences, choose their own topics, and more. Teachers could incorporate time for passion projects or Genius Hour, as inspired by Google's *20% time* program (Juliani, 2013).

Moving away from the insufficient practices of standardizing education by teaching to the middle will open up a world of learning for high-achieving students. Teachers can assess whether their practices are meeting the needs of their high achievers, provide more differentiated instruction, and offer individualized challenges that connect to students' passions.

Future Research

This study relied primarily on qualitative interviews and open-ended qualitative surveys. Creswell (2014) described several limitations of this form of research, including the use of "indirect information" (p. 191) about the participants' academic experiences, which have been filtered through the eyes of the student and parent. Furthermore, Creswell warned that the "researcher's presence may bias responses" (p. 191) since participants may be seeking to please the researcher instead of providing authentic information. Care has been taken to utilize several strategies recommended for enhancing the validity and reliability of qualitative studies, including triangulation of data, member checks of findings, compiling an audit trail, and including a maximum variation of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Future researchers could replicate this study to see if similar themes emerge from different participants. Next, researchers could utilize other methods to study high achievers, instead of taking a qualitative approach.

Another limitation of this study was that the findings may not be generalizable to other populations due to the qualitative nature of the design and the small group of participants involved. In order for the study to be more representative of wider experiences, participants were selected from three separate sites, and the views of students, parents, and teachers and counselors were solicited for a broad understanding of the lived experiences of high-achieving students. Future studies could involve more participants and more diverse populations. Furthermore, researchers could focus on the wider population to see which findings reflect students in general and which are more specific to the needs of high-achieving learners.

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<p style="text-align: center;">Status of Differentiated Instruction for High-Achieving Students</p> <p>High-achieving students have limited opportunities for differentiated instruction. A student noted, “We don’t get special stuff.”</p> <p>Students engage in various activities to fill the down time. Students spend a lot of time doing “something else” beside classwork. They read, write, draw, doodle, play, tutor, and, sometimes, get in trouble. Working ahead is generally not allowed.</p> <p>Teachers do provide some differentiated activities. For example, one teacher prepares a list of “must do/may do” activities, while another provides individualized goals.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Practices that Hinder High-Achieving Students</p> <p>High achievers are placed in mixed-ability classrooms. A teacher said high achievers are “not the squeaky wheels,” which makes it easy to overlook their needs.</p> <p>In recent years, there has been an increased focus on standardization. A parent called this “paint-by-number” teaching, which doesn’t meet the needs of high achievers.</p> <p>Teachers tend to teach to the middle (the average level of the learners in his/her classroom). A parent stated, “Kids rise to the level of expectations. When you don’t expect anything, they’re going to give you that.”</p> <p>Personality clashes occur when the teachers do not understand and/or meet the needs of high-achieving students. A parent proclaimed, “They don’t know what to do with him.”</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Practices that Support High-Achieving Students</p> <p>High achievers benefit when learning connects to their passions. A parent noted, “This nurtures self-motivation.” Students enjoy learning when it connects to their interests and abilities.</p> <p>Supportive teachers make a difference for high achievers. A parent noted, “There’s more to it than teaching concepts.” Teachers who recognize high achievers’ learning needs and work to meet them are greatly appreciated by parents and students.</p> <p>High achievers need to regularly face and conquer challenges. While these experiences cause students to feel “anxiety, enthusiasm, and nervousness” all at once, they scaffold the learning for high achievers, allowing them to reach higher levels.</p>

Figure 1. Summary of findings. This figure provides an outline of major themes that emerged and provides a snapshot of the voices of the parents, students, and teachers who participated in this study.

Section Six:
Scholarly Practitioner Reflection

Scholarly Practitioner Reflection

George, Simms, McLean, and Mayer (2007/2011) stated, “You do not have to be born with specific characteristics or traits of a leader. You do not have to wait for a tap on the shoulder. You do not have to be at the top of your organization” (p. 165). In 2014, when I first applied for the educational leadership and policy analysis doctoral program, I was already acting as an educational leader, and yet, in many ways, I was often waiting for the tap on the shoulder. I was not wholly sure I had all of the right leadership traits to move forward in my education and career. In many ways, I was trying on the robes of leadership without feeling as though I had fully earned them. The process of completing this program and writing a dissertation has pushed me to grow in more ways than I could have possibly imagined. Undergoing this transformative journey helped me develop as an educational and scholarly leader. I now feel as though I have earned my leadership robes (starting with the black ones I will wear to the graduation ceremony).

Dissertation Influence on Educational Leadership

I can say without a doubt that working on this doctoral degree and this dissertation has impacted my educational leadership more than any other event or experience in my life. It pushed me outside of my comfort zone, provided me confidence to grow as a leader, and informed my instructional practices. Furthermore, the program provided a strong base for the next phase of my career.

I knew from the start that I wanted to write a qualitative dissertation since writing about a person’s experiences comes far more naturally for me than writing about numbers. However, as an introvert, I would have much preferred for the data-gathering

stage to involve me sitting alone in a quiet room with stacks of numerical data. Instead, gathering data for qualitative research involves talking to people. It was difficult to approach educational leaders whom I did not know. I had to reach out to principals, counselors, and librarians and ask favors of them. Then, I had to convince strangers to give up their personal time to attend focus groups to share their lives and experiences. All of this was far outside of my comfort zone; however, I feel safe to say I rose to the occasion. Not only did I interact with all of these strangers, I ultimately enjoyed the experience of learning their stories and gleaning the kinds of data you cannot get without reaching out.

While continuing forward on my path to writing a dissertation, I was also making a major move in another area of my life as I began applying for leadership positions. After 11 years as an elementary librarian in my hometown, I felt it was time to take on a new career challenge. Again, I had to force myself to break through that dreaded comfort zone in order to apply for jobs outside of the school district where I spent 10 years as a student and 14 years as a teacher. I was not entirely sure I was qualified for the advanced positions I was seeking. Despite these trepidations, my dissertation process helped me approach my job search with more confidence than I would have had otherwise. While gathering data, I became more comfortable talking to strangers, which helped me when I walked into job interviews with unfamiliar faces. Furthermore, I also began to see myself more as a leader thanks to the dissertation process. I have thoughts and knowledge to contribute to the discourse due to the research I have conducted.

Ultimately, I was offered a job working with the GO CAPS (Greater Ozarks Center for Advanced Professional Studies) program through Springfield Public Schools.

In my role as an instructor/facilitator, I will be developing coursework and field experiences for high school students who are interested in becoming educators. As I take on a new position, my dissertation experiences will inform my professional practices. My new position involves working with high-achieving students, and I plan to implement the support structures I identified through my research and avoid the structures that hinder such students. A program like GO CAPS is a wonderful example of the potential educators have when they are free from standardization.

When I was completing my doctoral coursework, I could not have imagined how exactly I would use the information and lessons we were learning, but as I move into my new position, I can see many applications. The entire breadth of this doctoral program has provided me more knowledge of leadership theories/practices, organizational analysis, diversity and ethics, program evaluation, and policy analysis. Each of these items will be at the forefront of my mind as I develop the GO CAPS education program.

First, through this doctoral program, I gained an understanding of myself as an educational leader and as a teammate, and I plan to help them my future students develop as educational leaders and teammates using the literature and lessons from this doctoral program. Lencioni (2002) warned, “Like a chain with just one link broken, teamwork deteriorates even if a single dysfunction is allowed to flourish” (p. 189). My classroom will include a class of students from 19 area high schools. As we come together to form a team, I will be doing so with an awareness of the dysfunctions of teams and will help my students navigate those dysfunctions. I hope to help them consider each other’s strengths so they can see the value of having teammates with diverse skills and interests.

Next, the work of Bolman and Deal (2013) has inspired me to look at my GO CAPS program through the various frames of organizational analysis. Most visibly, I already see the need to incorporate the symbolic frame as I help my students become a community. Students are leaving their home schools to embark on an ambiguous journey with strangers in an unfamiliar space. While doing so, they will place a lot of trust in me, but I hope to help them learn to put trust in each other as we come together to create something entirely new. Being mindful of symbolism will help us form this community and to share our story as we help others understand what this program is all about.

Additionally, my students will benefit from my doctoral program's coursework with diversity and ethics, and I hope to help them become mindful of the diverse students and situations they will encounter and the ethical considerations that will surely arise. The work of Banaji and Greenwald (2013) strongly impacted me. It is in the forefront of my mind as I watch our nation struggle with issues of police violence, sexism, and immigration, as I wonder how much implicit bias plays a role in these world events. While I cannot impact our nation as a whole, I hope to use my role as an educational leader to help my students who plan to become teachers operate more deliberately in this world. The Association for the Study of Higher Education (2009) argued, "Future American progress depends on our ability to discard past legacies and marshal the talents inherent in our demographically diverse society to overcome the historical divides of prejudice, exclusion, and the color line" (p. 13). Many of my students have never been in a situation where they faced discrimination, so they may have a hard time empathizing with people who do; however, this is an important facet of being a teacher. My students

need to know they will encounter a diverse world full of students, and I hope to help them navigate those waters.

Finally, as I embark to develop a new program, policy analysis and program evaluation will be a continual part of my process in order to figure out what is successful and what is not. Thanks to Bardach and Patashnik's (2016) eightfold path, I have a process to follow as I consider the policies I incorporate, while Stone (2012) helped me realize the pitfalls of policy analysis. Things are never as simple as they seem, making policy a minefield that could erupt at any time. Newcomer, Hatry, and Wholey (2015) provided a path for me to follow when conducting a program evaluation. Not only do I hope to build a program I can be proud of, I hope to build one that will positively influence the next generation of educational leaders.

I am excited to see where the next phase of my journey takes me. Completing this dissertation and earning the title of doctor has certainly changed me as an educational leader and as a person. Leaving my comfort zone to embrace new challenges helped me to grow in confidence. That confidence propelled me to seek—and ultimately find—a tremendous new leadership opportunity, one where I can put the knowledge and experienced gained from this dissertation and from my doctoral degree coursework to use.

Dissertation Influence on Scholarly Leadership

For years, I watched my sons' struggles with their educations. Both of my sons are bright, and they both love to learn. Yet, both have been disappointed by their classroom experiences. They spend a lot of time bored in class, waiting for new instruction and activities. They rarely have their thirst for knowledge fulfilled, and they

have not been fully challenged to learn. As a mom, I observed this. Then, throughout my teaching career, I witnessed students with the same struggles again and again. Many times, these students are not in gifted programs, and their parents and teachers wonder how that can be when they are so clearly excelling in the classroom, oftentimes even winning spelling bees and math contests outside of school.

As a parent and a teacher, I have given a lot of thought to this group of high-achieving students over the years. I have intuitively felt that their needs were not being met. For my own sons, I conversed with teachers to brainstorm ways to challenge them in the classroom, and our family has provided a wealth of educational opportunities outside of school. As a teacher, I provided some opportunities for these students and tried to bring their voices to the table whenever I could. However, this never felt like enough, and it certainly was not impacting the wider breadth of high achievers outside of my family and my small-town school.

Though I initially resisted using this topic as the focus of research, once I finally did, I knew it was the right topic for me because it aligned so perfectly with my personal passions, and most importantly, it would provide me a platform for entering the scholarly discourse surrounding what I saw as an overlooked group. So much research focuses on giftedness and overlooks the high achievers, and so many teachers assume high achievers are doing just fine because they are such model students. And yet, I felt there was more to this story. After gathering and analyzing my data, it felt good to see that the experiences of 19 students from three diverse school districts had so much in common with what I thought to be true from my experiences as a parent and a teacher.

Supporting these hunches with actual data is what makes a scholar different from an educator. Instead of saying, “I *think* this to be true,” I can say, “I have data supporting this to be true.” That distinction matters when I discuss high achievers in the educational setting, when I present at conferences, and when I seek to share my research in a scholarly publication. I can stand on the base of knowledge I gathered from my review of existing literature, and I can add the lived experiences of the students, parents, and teachers I personally spoke with. Ultimately, I now feel qualified as an authority on this topic, which gives weight to my voice. I hope to use add that voice to the national educational dialogue through a scholarly publication, and I hope to impact educational practices by sharing my voice with colleagues and at conferences.

My broader experiences in the educational leadership and policy analysis doctoral program also contributed my growth as a scholarly leader. This program required us to interact with all types of research. Through that, I became more adept at understanding—and at questioning—scholarly research. I understand the major components of research design and can more easily comprehend literature. I can also recognize the limitations of a study. Through this process, I read more research than I had ever read before, which gives me a strong base of knowledge to stand on as a scholarly leader (the massive stacks of papers and books lining my shelves are a testament to this). When I am facing a problem or situation, I now have the voices of experts in my head, even when I do not explicitly recognize the source. This has changed the lenses through which I see the world.

Upon increasing my reading abilities, I hope to have also increased my writing abilities. My lifelong dream has been to be a writer. While I am currently doing more

writing than ever before, I will not truly feel like an author until I have published a piece. In the upcoming months, I plan to send off two manuscripts derived from the work produced in this dissertation. Sending off these manuscripts will be an accomplishment in and of itself, something I never would have achieved without this program. Publishing would be significant validation as a scholarly leader.

Going forward, I will take with me all that I have learned from my dissertation and degree, and this scholarship will guide my interactions with colleagues and influence my work as an education. After all, what good is research if it does not change your actions? While I had previously reacted by instinct and by training, I plan to be more reflective in the future and to operate in a way that relates to the literature I have read and the study I have conducted.

Summary

Mezirow, Taylor, and Associates (2009) described transformative learning as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (p. 22), which perfectly describes my experiences in this doctoral program. The coursework, the group projects, the independent work, and the culminating dissertation each contributed a thread to my transformation. The piles of scholarly articles, the heavy books, and the classroom discussions contributed more threads. Each person I interviewed, each special guest speaker, each professor, each classmate contributed more threads. When all is said and done, those many threads come together to transform an old garment into a new one.

Theoharis (2008) stated, “The social justice leader is the shirt made with dyed thread. Just as the dyed thread is woven into a shirt, the social justice is woven so deeply

into the leader that there is no separation” (p. 20). Similarly, the many threads of this doctoral program have become woven in the threads of my shirt as an educational leader and a scholarly leader. It is hard to recognize the new threads from the old me because they are now interwoven, but I know my countenance has changed. It is similar to trying on a new dress in a department store changing room. Sometimes, you look in the mirror and see your sloppy old self, but other times, you do a double take and think, “This looks good!” You stand a little taller and take a few extra looks, not to decide whether or not to buy the item, but just to take a peek at the new you in the mirror.

Transformative learning made me stand a little taller and look twice in the mirror, as I peeked at the new leader peering out. Most importantly, I liked what I saw. From this point on, I will move differently in the worlds of scholarship and education because of the new shirt I am wearing and the new title I am earning. As I embark on the next stage of my journey, I hope to help others sew new shirts by sharing these threads with them.

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APPENDIX A

Student Informed Consent for Research Project

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I would like to take a moment to introduce myself, tell you about my research project, and ask for your participation in my study. Currently, I am a librarian at Logan-Rogersville Upper Elementary, where I work with fourth through sixth grade students. I am pursuing a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis through the University of Missouri—Columbia and Missouri State University.

As a parent and a teacher, I have observed many high-achieving students and noticed that their academic experiences may differ from other students. I would like to better understand these experiences from the student's perspective. In what ways do our schools support and encourage the academic growth of these students, and in what ways do our schools hinder their academic development? This interest led me to select this topic as the research focus for my dissertation.

I would like your child to participate in my research study regarding high-achieving elementary students. Your child has been invited to be in this study because he/she has been identified as a high-achieving student by his/her school counselor based on his/her grades and standardized test scores (this personal information has not been relayed to me; instead, the counselor gave this envelope to qualifying students).

I will be hosting focus groups at your elementary school in May and would like you invite your child and a parent to participate (see the attached flyer for exact details). I'll bring some snacks and door prizes to thank you for your time, and a teacher who is accompanying me will do a STEM activity with the students during the parent interviews.

Please email me at librarykerri@gmail.com to RSVP or to ask questions.

I have attached the informed consent materials required by my university. Please read them for more information. The university requires consent from both the parent and the child for the student interviews, as well as parent consent for their own interviews. I'll have extra signature forms on hand at the event to sign.

Sincerely,

Kerri Cox
Doctoral Candidate at MU & MSU
Librarian at Logan-Rogersville

You have the right to be informed about the study procedures so that you can decide whether you want to provide consent for your child to participate in this study. If there is anything you do not understand or if you have any further questions, you may ask the researcher at any time.

Your child's participation is voluntary. He/she does not have to be in the study if he/she does not want to be. You may refuse for your child to be in the study and nothing will happen. If your child does not want to continue to be in the study, he/she may stop at any time without penalty.

Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before allowing your child to participate in this study. If you would like for your child to participate, sign in the appropriate area below.

Researcher: Kerri Cox

Title of Project: Scholars on the Sidelines: A Phenomenological Study of High Achieving Elementary Students in Southwest Missouri

Purpose of the project: To describe the academic experiences of high-achieving elementary students in public school classrooms

If you participate, you will be asked to: allow your child to participate in a focus group, in which the academic experiences of high achieving elementary students will be discussed amongst a small group of students from your child's school who have similarly been identified as high-achieving. An audio recording will be made of the focus group.

Time required for participation: Focus groups may last up to an hour, and your child can stop at any time without penalty.

Potential Risks of Study: Due to the nature of this study, there are no pertinent risks.

Potential Benefits of Study: The findings of this study may provide insight into the classroom experiences that support and/or hinder the academic development of high-achieving students. This information can be shared with teachers to help them understand the needs of this group and the best practices for meeting those needs. If you would like to read the findings once the dissertation is complete, the researcher can provide you with a digital copy.

How confidentiality will be maintained: The researcher will make every effort to maintain confidentiality. Information from focus groups will be stored in the researcher's files, and each participant will be provided a pseudonym to be used in the final report. The key connecting your child's name and pseudonym will be kept in a separate, secure location. Information contained in your child's records may not be given to anyone unaffiliated with the study in a form that could identify your child without your written consent, except as required by law.

Compensation/Costs: There is no compensation provided for participants, and there is no cost to participate.

Contact Information: If you have any questions about the study or if you would like additional information, please contact Kerri Cox. She can be reached by telephone at (417) 380-0914 or by email at librarykerri@gmail.com.

This study is being completed under the advisement of Dr. Cynthia MacGregor at Missouri State University. She can be reached by telephone at (417) 836-6046 or by email at CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu.

You may contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (which is a group of people who review the research studies to protect participants' rights) if you have questions regarding your child's rights as a research participant and/or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll your child or to continue to participate in this study. The IRB can be reached directly by telephone at (573) 882-3181 or by e-mail at umcresearchcibr@missouri.edu

Consent

I have read this parental consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my permission for my child to participate in this study. I understand that, in order for my child to participate, he/she will need to be able to give his/her consent also. I understand that participation is voluntary and I can withdraw my child at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

By signing this form I am attesting that I have read and understand the information above, and I freely give my consent for my child to participate.

Child's Printed Name: _____

Child's Age: _____ Child's Grade in School: _____

Parent's Printed Name: _____

Parent's Signature: _____

Date Reviewed & Signed: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

Home Address: _____

Please have your child provide his/her consent on the following page, which has been written in child-friendly language.

Dear Student,

You have been invited to participate in a research study about high-achieving elementary students and their classroom experiences.

Why were YOU are invited?

You are invited to be in this study because your school counselor has identified you as a high-achieving student, which means you have earned good grades and have done very well on standardized tests.

What will happen?

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher and other students to talk about your experiences. The other students will be high-achieving students from your school. The researcher will ask you several questions. For example, you might be asked to describe your favorite type of learning experiences or to talk about times when you feel bored in school. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. An audio recording will be made during this discussion.

Can anything good happen to me?

The information you provide could help teachers understand how to best meet the needs of students like you in their classrooms. This may not help you directly, but you can feel good about knowing you've helped other students.

Can anything bad happen to me?

Due to the nature of this study, nothing bad should happen to you. The information you provide will be kept confidential, meaning no one will know what you personally said.

What if I don't want to do this?

If you say you do not want to be in the study, you just have to tell us. No one will be mad at you. You can also say yes and later if you change your mind, you can quit the study. The choice is up to you and your parent(s).

Who will know my answers?

Your answers will be included in a report and combined with information from parents, teachers, and students from three different schools. Your personal name and information will not be used. We will do our best to make sure that your statements are not shared in a way that identifies you. Your parents or guardian can ask for a copy of the final report.

Who can I talk to about the study?

You can ask questions any time. You can ask now. You can ask later. You can talk to the researcher or you can talk to someone else, at any time during the study.

Do you want to be in this study (titled Scholars on the Sidelines: A Phenomenological Study of High-Achieving Elementary Students)?

☐ ***YES***

☐ ***NO***

Signature of Student

Date

Printed Name of Student

APPENDIX B

Parent Informed Consent for Research Project

Researcher: Kerri Cox

Title of Project: Scholars on the Sidelines: A Phenomenological Study of High Achieving Elementary Students in Southwest Missouri

Purpose of the project: To describe the academic experiences of high achieving elementary students in public school classrooms

If you participate, you will be asked to: participate in a focus group, in which the academic experiences of high achieving elementary students will be discussed amongst a small group of parents of students from your child's school. An audio recording will be made.

Time required for participation: Focus groups may last up to an hour.

Potential Risks of Study: Due to the nature of this study, there are no pertinent risks.

Benefits: Focus groups may provide insight into the classroom experiences that support and/or hinder the academic development of high-achieving students. This information can be shared with teachers to help them understand the needs of this group and the best practices for meeting those needs. If you would like to read the findings once the dissertation is complete, the researcher can provide you with a digital copy.

Compensation/Costs: There is no compensation provided for participants, and there is no cost to participate.

How confidentiality will be maintained: The researcher will make every effort to maintain confidentiality. Information from focus groups will be stored in the researcher's files, and each participant will be provided a pseudonym to be used in the final report. The key connecting your name and pseudonym will be kept in a separate, secure location.

Contact: If you have any questions about the study or if you would like additional information, please contact Kerri Cox. She can be reached by telephone at (417) 380-0914 or by email at librarykerri@gmail.com.

This study is being completed under the advisement of Dr. Cynthia MacGregor at Missouri State University. She can be reached by telephone at (417) 836-6046 or by email at CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu.

You may contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (which is a group of people who review the research studies to protect participants' rights) if you have questions regarding your rights and/or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study. The IRB can be reached directly by telephone at (573) 882-3181 or by e-mail at umcresearchcibr@missouri.edu

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate there will not be any negative consequences. Please be aware that if you decide to participate, you may stop participating at any time and you may decide not to answer any specific question.

Consent

By signing this form I am attesting that I have read and understand the information above, and I freely give my consent to participate.

Printed Name:

Signature:

Date Reviewed & Signed:

Email Address:

Phone Number:

Home Address:

Child's Printed Name: _____

Child's Age: _____ Child's Grade in School: _____

APPENDIX C

Teacher/Counselor Informed Consent for Research Project

Dear Teacher/Counselor,

I would like to take a moment to introduce myself, tell you about my research project, and ask for your participation in my study. Currently, I am a librarian at Logan-Rogersville Upper Elementary, where I work with fourth through sixth grade students. I am also pursuing a doctorate in Educational Leadership through the University of Missouri—Columbia and Missouri State University.

As a parent and a teacher, I observed many high-achieving students and noticed that their academic experiences may differ from other students. I would like to better understand these experiences from the student's perspective. In what ways do our schools support and encourage the academic growth of these students, and in what ways do our schools hinder the academic development? This interest led me to select this topic as the research focus for my dissertation.

You have been identified as a teacher or counselor of high-achieving students, and I would like you to share your experiences as part of my dissertation research. I will be organizing a series of focus groups at your school—one for students, one for parents, and one for teachers/counselors. The information from these discussions will help me learn about the academic experiences of high-achieving students, leading to a better understanding of which classroom structures support their learning and which hinder their learning experiences.

I am asking for your voluntary participation in this project. Please read the following information. If you would like to participate, sign in the appropriate area below.

Researcher: Kerri Cox

Title of Project: Scholars on the Sidelines: A Phenomenological Study of High Achieving Elementary Students in Southwest Missouri

Purpose of the project: To describe the academic experiences of high achieving elementary students in public school classrooms

If you participate, you will be asked to: participate in a focus group, in which the academic experiences of high achieving elementary students will be discussed amongst a small group of teachers and counselors from your school. An audio recording will be made of this discussion.

Time required for participation: Focus groups may last up to an hour.

Potential Risks of Study: Due to the nature of this study, there are no pertinent risks.

Benefits: Focus groups may provide insight into the classroom experiences that support and/or hinder the academic development of high-achieving students. This information can be shared with teachers to help them understand the needs of this group and the best practices for meeting those needs. If you would like to read the findings once the dissertation is complete, the researcher can provide you with a digital copy.

How confidentiality will be maintained: The researcher will make every effort to maintain confidentiality. Information from focus groups will be stored in the researcher's files, and each participant will be provided a pseudonym to be used in the final report. The key connecting your name and pseudonym will be kept in a separate, secure location.

Contact: If you have any questions about the study or if you would like additional information, please contact Kerri Cox. She can be reached by telephone at (417) 380-0914 or by email at librarykerri@gmail.com.

This study is being completed under the advisement of Dr. Cynthia MacGregor at Missouri State University. She can be reached by telephone at (417) 836-6046 or by email at CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu.

You may contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (which is a group of people who review the research studies to protect participants' rights) if you have questions regarding your rights and/or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study. The IRB can be reached directly by telephone at (573) 882-3181 or by e-mail at umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate there will not be any negative consequences. Please be aware that if you decide to participate, you may stop participating at any time and you may decide not to answer any specific question.

By signing this form I am attesting that I have read and understand the information above, and I freely give my consent to participate.

Print Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date Reviewed & Signed: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

Home Address: _____

APPENDIX D

Focus Group Protocol for Students

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself?
2. What is your favorite thing about school? What is your least favorite thing about school?
3. I have heard that you are pretty sharp students. Because of this, do you sometimes do different work or different lessons than the rest of the class, or do you mostly do the same work and lessons?
4. In general, would you say you wish your teachers would move more quickly or more slowly through the lessons and instruction than you would like?
 - What does it feel like when the instruction moves too slowly?
 - Have you ever had the opportunity to work at your own pace? If so, what was that like?
5. In general, how often would you describe your overall school experience as boring? What makes you feel bored at school?
6. What does it feel like to learn something new?
 - In general, how often do you feel like you learn something new at school? Do you wish your teachers would teach you more challenging lessons or do you wish the lessons were easier?
7. Do you sometimes get choices in how/what you learn, or choices about how you demonstrate your learning? If so, how do you feel about those opportunities?
8. Do you sometimes get to pursue your own passions, explore topics you are interested in, or make connections to your own life? If so, how do you feel about those opportunities?
9. If you were to think of your very favorite learning experience, what was that like?
10. If you were to think of your least favorite learning experience, what was that like?
11. If you had a magic wand and could make your school fit your learning needs and style, what changes would you make?

APPENDIX E

Focus Group Protocol for Parents

1. Today, we are talking about high achieving elementary students. Would you say the term “high achiever” fits your child, and why or why not?
2. In looking at your child’s overall school experiences, would you say the pacing of instruction fits his/her needs? (In other words, do the teachers move through lessons as quickly or as slowly as your child learns the material?)
3. In looking at your child’s overall school experiences, would you say the level of challenge fits his/her needs? Why or why not? (In other words, does your student often encounter materials that are difficult for him or her or just beyond his/her level enough to cause them to struggle a bit?)
4. In looking at your child’s overall school experiences, would your student gets to pursue his/her passions at school? Why or why not? (In other words, in which ways do students encounter the opportunity to connect learning to their own lives and interests, to demonstrate creativity, to share with an authentic audience, to have choice in how or what they learn?)
5. In which ways do schools/teachers support your child’s academic development in the classroom?
6. In which ways do schools/teachers hinder your child’s academic development in the classroom?
7. In general, would you say our educational system does enough to meet the needs of high-achieving students? Why or why not?
8. If you had a magic wand and could redo the public education system to make it better fit your child’s learning style and abilities, what changes would you make?

APPENDIX F

Focus Group Protocol for Teachers and School Counselors

Today, we are talking about high achieving elementary students. While gifted students may be high achievers, not all are, so please do not focus on students enrolled in gifted programs. For the purposes of this study, high achievers are defined as students who have a high capacity for learning and who demonstrate this through their grades and standardized assessment scores.

1. How would you describe the high-achieving students you have encountered?
2. In thinking about high-achieving students, how does the pacing of instruction generally match their needs? (In other words, do teachers move through lessons as quickly or as slowly as high-achieving students learn the material?)
3. In thinking about high-achieving students, how does the level of challenge generally match to their needs? (In other words, do high-achieving students encounter materials that are difficult for them or that cause them to work harder to succeed?)
4. In thinking about high-achieving students, how does the level of engagement generally fit their needs? (In other words, in which ways do students encounter the opportunity to connect learning to their own lives and interests, to demonstrate creativity, to share with an authentic audience, to have choice in how or what they learn?)
5. In which ways do schools/teachers support high-achieving students' academic development in the classroom?
6. In which ways do schools/teachers hinder high-achieving students' academic development in the classroom?
7. In general, would you say our educational system does enough to meet the needs of high-achieving students? Why or why not?
8. If you had a magic wand and could redo the public education system to make it better fit the learning style and abilities of high-achieving students, what changes would you make?

APPENDIX G

Student Survey About High-Achieving Students

You have been identified as a high-achieving elementary student based on your grades and standardized test scores. Please answer the following questions about your classroom experiences.

1. I have heard that you are a pretty sharp student. Because of this, do you sometimes do different work or different lessons than the rest of the class, or do you mostly do the same work and lessons?
2. In general, would you say you wish your teachers would move more quickly or more slowly through the lessons and instruction than you would like? How so?
3. In general, how often would you describe your overall school experience as boring? What makes you feel bored at school?
4. Do you wish your teachers would teach you more challenging lessons or do you wish the lessons were easier? Why?
5. Do you sometimes get choices in how/what you learn, or choices about how you demonstrate your learning? If so, how do you feel about those opportunities?
6. Do you sometimes get to pursue your own passions, explore topics you are interested in, or make connections to your own life? If so, how do you feel about those opportunities?
7. If you were to think of your very favorite learning experience, what was that like?
8. If you were to think of your least favorite learning experience, what was that like?
9. If you had a magic wand and could make your school fit your learning needs and style, what changes would you make?

APPENDIX H

Parental Survey about High-Achieving Students

Your student has been identified as a high achieving elementary student based on his/her grades and standardized test scores. In general, high-achieving students are those who have the readiness to learn at an advanced level and demonstrate this ability by performing well in the classroom and on standardized testing. Please keep this description of high-achieving students in mind as you answer the following interview questions.

1. In looking at your child's overall school experiences, can you describe whether or not the **pacing** of instruction fits his/her needs? (You might consider whether or not the lessons match how quickly your child learns new skills and information)
2. In looking at your child's overall school experiences, would you say the level of **challenge** fits his/her needs? (You might consider whether or not the lessons present new skills and information that your child doesn't already know)
3. In looking at your child's overall school experiences, would you say the **level of engagement** fits his/her needs? (You might consider whether your child encounters the opportunity to connect learning to their own lives and interests, to demonstrate creativity, to share with an authentic audience, to have choice in how or what they learn?)
4. In which ways do schools/teachers **support** your child's academic development in the classroom?
5. In which ways do schools/teachers **hinder** your child's academic development in the classroom?
6. In general, would you say our educational system does enough to meet the needs of high-achieving students? Why or why not?
7. If you had a magic wand and could redo the public education system to make it better fit your child's learning style and abilities, what changes would you make?

APPENDIX I

Teacher/Counselor Survey about High-Achieving Students

You have been identified as a teacher or counselor who has worked with high-achieving students. In general, high-achieving students are those who have the readiness to learn at an advanced level and demonstrate this ability by performing well in the classroom and on standardized testing. Please keep this description of high-achieving students in mind as you answer the following interview questions.

1. In looking at your classroom, can you describe whether or not the **pacing** of instruction fits the needs of high-achieving students? (You might consider whether or not the lessons match how quickly the students learn new skills and information)
2. In looking at your classroom, would you say the level of **challenge** fits the needs of high-achieving students? (You might consider whether or not the lessons present new skills and information that these students don't already know)
3. In looking at your classroom, would you say the **level of engagement** fits the needs of high-achieving students? (You might consider whether these students encounter the opportunity to connect learning to their own lives and interests, to demonstrate creativity, to share with an authentic audience, to have choice in how or what they learn.)
4. In which ways do schools/teachers **support** the academic development of high-achieving students in the classroom?
5. In which ways do schools/teachers **hinder** the academic development of high-achieving students in the classroom?
6. In general, would you say our educational system does enough to meet the needs of high-achieving students? Why or why not?
7. If you had a magic wand and could redo the public education system to make it better fit the learning style and abilities of high-achieving students, what changes would you make?

VITA

Kerri R. Cox has found joy in learning throughout her life. This passion led her to pursue a career in education. After graduating from Logan-Rogersville High School in 1993, she attended Missouri State University in Springfield, earning Bachelor of Science in English education in 1998. Her first teaching job was at Crane High School, where she taught English and drama from 1998-2002. After the birth of her first son, she sought a teaching position closer to home, which she found at Nixa High School. In 2004, a position opened up at her alma mater, Logan-Rogersville High School. In her first year at LRHS, her family welcomed a second son.

During her years of teaching high school English, Kerri returned to Missouri State University to begin working on her Master of Science. She majored in reading education and took many library science courses as electives. In 2004, she finished her master's degree and went on to earn her K-12 Library Media Specialist teaching certificate. In 2007, she made the move to the Logan-Rogersville Upper Elementary, where she happily spent many years sharing her love of books with her students.

The call to further her education eventually lured Kerri to graduate school again, as she began working on a Doctor of Education in educational leadership through a cooperative program with University of Missouri—Columbia and Missouri State University. Upon finishing her dissertation, Kerri will officially become Dr. Cox in July of 2018 and begin a new career path with the Greater Ozarks Center for Advanced Professional Studies (GO CAPS) program, helping to inspire a future generation of teachers.