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**Gifted Boys in English:  
Uncovering Underachievement**

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the requirements for the degree of

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## **ABSTRACT**

Gifted underachievement is a severe and alarming phenomenon. There are a range of complex factors leading to the underachievement of many of our gifted students within our schools. This thesis examines one particular group of underachievers; gifted adolescents in English. Personal observations, national assessment results and previous research studies have identified gifted male students as having serious problems with underachievement in English at the secondary level. This thesis aims to examine this phenomenon in more detail.

Ten students were chosen to partake in this study, two from each year level at high school. These students were identified as having gifts or talents in English, but were currently performing well below measures of their potential. These participants represented a range of underachievement, from those who are passing in English but are not excelling, to those who are severely underachieving and have behavioural and attitudinal problems. Research methods were designed to gain as much information about the students as possible in order to build a detailed profile of their underachievement. Work samples, assessment results, previous school reports and formative test results were collected for each student.

Participants also completed a questionnaire which asked them to evaluate their opinions and attitudes towards school. The majority of this research study focused on interviews in order to gain an insight into the profiles of underachievement. All ten participants were interviewed about school, achievement and learning. Interviews were also conducted with the most recent English teacher of the participant as well as their parents/caregivers.

The profiles of students suggested that underachievement is a diverse and complex phenomenon. These ten participants are a varied and unique group of students with individual needs and challenges. It quickly became clear that no single profile of giftedness could be established for this diverse group of learners. However, despite the fact these students are very diverse, the reasons and causes for underachievement were similar across all ten participants. Participants suggested they were bored, unmotivated and unchallenged in class and failed to see the relevance of their learning. In class, participants were described as being withdrawn, distracted and sometimes had antisocial behavioural tendencies. Participants struggled with perfectionism, deadlines and the development of their ideas. All ten participants were achieving well below their potential. Parents and their sons believed it was impossible to meet their individual needs within public secondary schools and within standards-based assessment.

Despite their underachievement, participants spoke with excitement about the changes they would like to see in the English classroom. These participants want challenge, interest, variety and an ability to demonstrate their learning through a variety of methods. Many suggestions proposed by participants pose difficult challenges for educators. However, it is clear that our gifted students are not succeeding within our secondary schools and under our national qualification system.

# CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
<b>Contents</b>	iv
Appendices	vi
<b>Chapter 1 – Introduction</b>	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Research purpose and questions	9
1.3 Research Objectives	10
1.4 Organisation of the Thesis	11
<b>Chapter 2 – Literature Review</b>	
2.1 Defining giftedness	12
2.2 Gifted education in secondary schools	14
2.3 Gifted and talented Maori students	16
2.4 Gifted adolescents	19
2.5 Defining underachievement	21
2.6 Gifted boys	23
2.7 Male underachievement in adolescence	28
2.8 Causes of underachievement	29
2.9 Curbing underachievement	31
2.10 Conclusion	33
<b>Chapter 3 – Methodology</b>	
3.1 Introduction	36
3.2 Methodology	37
3.3 Selection of participants	38
3.4 Data gathering	40
3.5 Analysis of data	44
3.6 Ethical considerations	46
3.7 Benefits to participants	52
3.8 Conclusion	53
<b>Chapter 4 – Student Profiles</b>	
4.1 Introduction	54
4.2 Phillip	54
4.3 Matiu	64
4.4 Joe	72
4.5 Shaun	79
4.6 Brad	87

4.7 Wiremu	95
4.8 Jordan	103
4.9 Max	112
4.10 Jack	121
4.11 Matthew	131
4.12 Summary	138

## **Chapter 5 – Results**

5.1 Responses to Heacox (1991) Questionnaire	140
5.2 Factors Impeding Achievement – Introduction	152
5.3 National Certificate of Educational Achievement	152
5.4 Interest as a motivating tool	155
5.5 Attendance	156
5.6 Concern for welfare	158
5.7 Extracurricular involvement	160
5.8 Perfectionism and deadlines	162
5.9 Teachers’ opinions of students	164
5.10 Variety	166
5.11 Group work	170
5.12 Summary	172

## **Chapter 6 – Discussion**

6.1 Deadlines and perfectionism	174
6.2 National Certificate of Educational Achievement	177
6.3 Variety, choice and independence	179
6.4 Parents	183
6.5 Level of work	185
6.6 Extracurricular involvement	187
6.7 Gifted Maori students	188
6.8 Implications for future research	191
6.9 Summary	193

## **Chapter 7 – Conclusion** 195

## **References** 200

## **Appendices** 209

## APPENDICES

A	Letter of consent to the Principal and Board of Trustees (research site)	209
B	Letter of consent to the Principal and Board of Trustees (research site) to access databases	210
C	Information letter (for school, teachers and parents)	211
D	Information letter (for student participants)	214
E	Consent forms (for students, parents and teachers)	217
F	Questionnaires to be administered to students	220
G	Interview questions to be used with students	225
H	Interview questions to be used with parents	227
I	Interview questions to be used with teachers	229
J	Authority for the Release of Tape Transcripts	230